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• THE SWITHIN CHRONICLES 2 •

# The Comet's Tail

SHARON MARIA BIDWELL

# THE SWITHIN CHRONICLES 2: THE COMET'S TAIL

Sharon Maria Bidwell

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## Dedication

*To the love of my life, always.*

*To Lorri for being a great editor, and one of the first to fall for Ryanac.*

*And to Mr B. my favourite English teacher, who once wrote in my school report that “Sharon could do well with her writing if she only stopped coming up with such fanciful tales.”*

## Prologue

*A tongue of fire burns half-gold, half-black,  
Its flames tinged with bile and bitterness.  
The comet had three tails that day, they say.  
Cast aside thy pride, thy vanity, thy essence.  
Die to arise, white guard. The rest is ashes.*

-- Swithin Prophecy

*The abysm deepens...*

Blackness won out, pushing the gold into the distance. Stars swirled just out of sight though he could sense them. He could reach out and claim them anytime he wanted. Of course, they could rush forward and claim him instead. He tensed, not from need but fear, and the being in his arms tensed with him, no doubt sensing his brief hesitation.

He drew in a breath on a soft sigh and refused to listen to the fear. That way led to danger. He needed to relax into this. His skin prickled with slowly forming crystals and then, as the tension went out of him, the ice melted in his veins and his blood flowed again.

He explored with touch, not physical or mystical sight. Hands wandered aimlessly, recklessly, in pure lusciousness. He rolled, taking that softness with him, placing it under him. It yielded, willing, compliant. Flesh skimmed against flesh, giving and receiving. In the midst of all that softness, he pierced it with the only rigid thing at his disposal. A cry came in

reply; but sheathed, his cock had better control of his body than his mind and he could not respond to the shout.

A hand pressed against his chest, wandered wantonly, touching, feeling every inch of him. He shivered, not from cold, but from the heat of desire. So long denied this, he dipped his head, took skin in his mouth and sucked on it, leaving his mark.

The ice arrived finally, but did nothing to cool his ardour. The chill drew him toward orgasm and he had to fight it a little. He wasn't ready. This wasn't over. Thankfully, the power agreed with him. The comet wanted to stretch out the pleasure as much as he did. It had learned as he had learned. They were learning together.

They rolled again, his arm around the slim waist, taking the diminutive form on top of him. He opened his eyes but saw nothing through the cloud of long, dark, tangled tresses that hung over his face. A sharp cry filled his ears, spurring him over the edge despite his wishes. The cry brought out his savage side and he had time to wonder if all men possessed this within them, and then he gave himself over to the inevitable. Soft, silken, clenching pulses milked the last of his strength. He closed his eyes and drifted.

The abyss welcomed him. Aware he breathed in reality, he was happy to be amongst the stars for now. The comet was happy to have him. A light touch stroked down his torso and then his other length. He opened one eye and met the other person's gaze. Her small lips pouted. Already she awaited his revival. As much as he loved to be here, his cock twitched at the thought of another. He had more than one person to satisfy. Both he and the comet enjoyed this, but in reality, he needed rest.

## Chapter One

Twin towering cliffs created a valley. The wind blowing through the gorge poured out and rushed across the desert, stirring the sand. This wind carried no scent, just warmth. It also contained comforting moisture so out of place with the dry sun-bleached landscape that it distracted Uly enough for the blade to catch a strand of hair that had escaped his ponytail. The tableau froze, and he was not the only one to watch those few severed strands float to earth.

Uly stared up into the other man's eyes and, for a moment, he would have liked to believe they held mercy. Then the lips twitched and the expression hardened. The blade swung in an arc, slashing towards his arm, and he twisted his body just in time to block. His opponent changed tactics, stepping in, spinning, turning his body so that he could strike with the sword. A strike was when one fought with the flat of the blade rather than a sharp edge. Uly would suffer no physical blow other than some possible bruising, but the force behind the blow made him gasp, almost sent him to his knees. He couldn't afford to fall. He could lose his head in such a vulnerable position. Hastily, Uly tried to correct his feet but at once knew the move would trip him. In less time than it took to blink, he assessed how to turn the stumble to his advantage. He went with the fall, curling into a roll, careful not to nick his skin with his own weapon. He carried the roll through even when his weary limbs felt the brief relief of solid, flat, supporting ground, and brought his body out of the roll, completely over and back onto his feet. Uly spun as he came up and faced the man. He did not have to see his reflection in the other man's eyes to know his own eyes had gone wide in horror but, alas, he could. He hadn't expected his attacker to be so close and he brought his sword up by instinct rather than actual thought.

A clash of steel rang out. The noise echoed off the distant canyon walls. Laughter accompanied the sound, but Uly didn't have time to spare a glance at the other men who stood by, watching. Sweat ran into his eyes, stinging, but he didn't even have time to blink



and had to endure the pain. Now he understood why some of the men wore headbands in this terrain. The headbands helped keep vision clear from hair as well as sweat. He had thought they looked a little silly. The man bearing down on him looked far from silly. He looked nothing more than menacing. Uly searched those eyes, trying to find the humanity beneath. It had fled.

Uly wore only light armour, but he had never been so grateful for it. Even so, as the warrior fainted with a thrust, and then turned the blow into another strike, Uly cried out. This time the flat of the blade had swept in to slap his sword arm. The immediate pain soon dissipated, spreading out into a chilling numbness that flowed down his arm. His fingers loosened on the grip, the bone handle wobbling in his hand as though it fought for freedom. He gritted his teeth, sending silent commands to his fingers that tightened his hold on the weapon. His hand and arm still felt numb, but he maintained his grasp. Turning into middle stance, he saw the man met him with low stance, and he attacked accordingly. He held up well for a few strokes; he even managed a couple of over cuts before something in that gaze altered. The look was subtle, but he recognised it. The man played with him, and the situation was about to change.

The next strike Uly tried met a master cut, the swordsman meeting his strike with one of his own in such a manner that it deflected the oncoming blow, while at the same time it struck home. Uly cried out purposely this time, not knowing what he hoped to gain from the sound. Perhaps he unconsciously pleaded and hoped the other man would hear him. No such luck, for as Uly struck again, his opponent immediately turned the move into “travelling,” a method of attack that comprised meeting and overcoming the assault with several blows of his own. The sheer speed made Uly retreat, and yet, somehow, he managed to deflect each blow. Still, it brought the other man closer. Wanting nothing more now than to gain some distance, Uly stepped to the side. His adversary met the move with a method known as “setting aside.” Although Uly recognised the style and knew what to expect, he failed to react in time. The other sword hooked over his, forced it downwards, and trapped his weapon. The man moved in an elegant spin that brought him to Uly’s side and slightly to his back. That hard body pressed against him.

At once, the man’s left hand forced his head back as a knife pushed in a sharp line against his throat. Uly had lost the fight. He was dead.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Don’t you ever let up? Couldn’t you have just eased off out there?”

“No, and I’m not going to.” Ryanac flung the Khukuri down on the table. Uly’s gaze went to it, and he couldn’t help swallowing. The Khukuri was an imported weapon, made of steel with a handle of exotic hardwood, intended for close combat. Ryanac had told him woodsmen found they liked the thicker outside edge of the blade, as the wide part was heavy enough to use as an axe. The weapon, about sixteen inches in total length, possessed a curved

blade of twelve inches. The upward diagonal swipe action made it perfect for cutting the neck. A moment ago, Ryanac had pressed that blade against Uly's throat.

The way Ryanac had held it would have made for an awkward cut and went against its intended purpose, but in the heat of the moment, Uly hadn't noticed that. Only when Uly queried the hold, did Ryanac admit he had held it that way on purpose, in case Uly panicked and received a cut by accident. If he hadn't asked, Uly had the feeling Ryanac would never have bothered to draw his attention to the fact he'd never been in real danger.

"Why couldn't we have kept to the rapier?"

"Because it's a peacock's weapon."

The frown didn't so much creep over Uly's face as march right in. Ryanac grinned at him in response, which Uly found irritating even though he'd come to expect it. "What's a peacock?"

Ryanac sighed, something he had taken to doing a lot lately. "I keep forgetting there's so much that is commonplace to me that's been precluded from your life due to your background. Of course there are no peacocks in your wretched city..." The words trailed off. Ryanac looked at him with an expression one might have taken for apology if they didn't know better.

Uly shrugged. What could he say? Simmie was a wretched city before the Swithin took over the area, and it still needed to change. No matter how many changes for the better Ryanac's people brought to that city and the people within it, the man would no doubt always see it as wretched.

"I'm sorry. You know why I feel that way. I've seen what goes on at the docks, in the back alleys and taverns. I've seen your people at their worst and so far I've seen little good." The big man paused. "You're one good thing to come out of there. If there was such a thing as destiny, it seems prophetic our paths crossed with one little thief out of the whole city."

A slight warmth seeped into Uly's face. He had a habit of flushing now, almost as much as the habit of nibbling on his lower lip with his teeth. "Not so little now," Uly remarked shyly. He was tall, but had been skin and bone all those months ago. Now he stood there, a lean, yet finely muscular young man. He didn't need someone else to tell him. His reflection shocked him every time he saw it.

Ryanac's grin returned. His stare flickered up and down but it was only teasing, not the full weight of the large man's gaze. "A peacock is a beautiful bird. The male has a wonderful tail, good for posturing."

"I take it the comment wasn't complimentary, then?"

"No. The rapier has its uses, but there are other and better options for true sword fights."

"In your opinion," Uly countered. Ryanac narrowed his gaze and waited. Uly could press the point and they would banter, but he lacked the heart for it. He lowered his gaze and let the subject drop. "Only the male?" Uly asked on impulse, as Ryanac turned away.

"What?"

"You said the male bird has a wonderful tail."

"That's right. Only the male." Those eyes narrowed again, asking silently where Uly was going with this. Uly glanced up, and then back down, his gaze travelling over Ryanac's form on the way. Even though he wasn't looking at the man's face directly, he could see enough. Ryanac's expression conveyed surprise, amusement, and irritation all at once.

"Do I have to put you back on a waster?" the big man growled out.

Uly tried to keep his expression blank, but instantly the muscles in his face tightened. The movement was no doubt almost imperceptible, but Ryanac would notice. The man had a way of assessing the moods and mannerisms of others. Uly held no delusions. He did not think he was immune to the man's scrutiny. Indeed, Ryanac manipulated him as much as Ryanac manipulated anyone. He would have resented it if he did not believe in the man and his intentions. Uly had to wonder if Ryanac realised he wasn't the only one capable of reading some faces now. Ryanac clearly saw his discomfort and found it amusing. Uly gritted his teeth, trying not to speak in insolence.

"I do not need more practice with a toy," he finally managed to force out.

A waster, or bevin, was a wooden practice sword, and in some ways it did indeed resemble something a child might play with.

"If the fight out there were for real you would be dead." Ryanac drew his sword and gave it a couple of practice swings. The familiar grin came and went as he deliberately twirled the blade close enough to disturb the air next to Uly's face. Uly stood his ground, trying not to flinch. He almost managed, but had to turn his face aside eventually. "What did I tell you about hard and soft?" Ryanac asked.

Despite the situation, Uly's lips twitched. This was a fighting term, not a sexual one, but they could both see the funny side. Ryanac appeared to struggle with a grin and finally settled his face into an expression of disapproval. He didn't fool Uly for a minute and Uly struggled not to smile. Slowly lowering his gaze, he spoke.

"During the fight when blades connect, use the moment to learn what you can of your opponent. Take control of the fight and exploit his style against him. Try to ascertain the challenger's intent, and then counter strength with weakness and weakness with strength."

"More words than I used but you have the gist of it." Ryanac turned away. "Five styles. What are they?"

Uly hesitated, suppressing yet another groan. Ryanac would hear exasperation in his voice as he rattled them off, though. "The fifth is old style, or Swithin style," Uly finished. In truth, the Swithin style was the basis of all the rest. They were the first nation to use wider

and heavier swords. Some used shields, and some guardsmen like Ryanac preferred to fight with a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other, or at least have one within easy reach on his person should the opportunity to use it arise.

Ryanac had said he intended to teach Uly to use all their available arsenal, though that would take time and far longer than the few months Uly had already spent in weapons training with Ryanac, or the two available weeks it would take for them to reach the Swithin City. They were taking Markis, the Swithin prince, home with his new bride, Tressa. Only this morning Ryanac had remarked on how odd it felt to think Markis had married less than two days ago and of how they, all three men, deflowered the princess and left the Azu plains only yesterday. In truth, the sparring fight this morning proved hard but welcome. Uly couldn't help wondering if perhaps they both needed the distraction. The last thing he wanted to think about right now was Markis and Tressa.

"And the sixth style?" Ryanac asked lazily, his mouth finally easing into a grin.

Uly managed a small smile. "Ryanac's style. Meaning grab a jug, a plate, a chair, anything within reach."

"Stances."

"Back guard, close guard, low, middle, high, hanging, and long."

The grin left the older man's face and he drew his brow into a frown. He watched, patient, waiting. Uly opened his eyes wider, thinking hard, his gaze flickering from side to side. He realised the mistake and sought for the answer.

"Also short and inside," he added.

"And the four openings?" Ryanac barely gave Uly a chance to reply. He slapped out with the blade, striking Uly's right arm. Ryanac glared his accompanying question.

"Your adversary's right side," Uly said, leaning a little to the left, away from the sting of the blow. He tried to jump back, but Ryanac slapped him on the left without effort. "The left," Uly barked out. "Your adversary's left side and right below the belt and left below the belt." He snapped out the remaining answers, jumping back out of reach as he did so. He might have backed out of the tent if the flap had not closed after them. He would have to bend to raise it, and Ryanac gave him no chance for that. The guard followed and slapped him with the blade on the right and then left thigh. Uly couldn't help glaring back. Slowly, Ryanac raised his sword as if he would bring the blade down hard against the crown of Uly's skull, controlling the movement only just before the blade touched. The steel made the slightest connection on the top of Uly's head almost as though the man were the king bestowing a blessing. Then he brought the sword down and pointed it away. Uly met Ryanac's gaze.

"What did I tell you about hard and soft?" Ryanac asked again.

Uly, well aware of the meaning, shook his head. "You have no weaknesses, not in swordplay anyway."

"You mean none that you can see."

"I mean, you don't have any."

"Everyone has weaknesses."

"Not you. Not with the sword. None out there could beat you in a fight one-to-one. I didn't expect to come close, but you didn't have to take it so hard with everyone watching. You didn't have to completely humiliate me out there."

Ryanac hardened his gaze. "Is that what you really think I did? Is that what you think happened?"

Uly frowned, searching for some answer he sensed was there but which escaped him. He nodded.

"I did no such thing." Holding the sword aside, Ryanac closed the distance between them. "You held your ground. You even managed a couple of strikes I never intended you to. Not any I couldn't block in time, but still they got past my defence long enough to catch my attention. For someone with so little training and few fighting skills, you held up well. More importantly, you have begun to react by instinct rather than taking the time to think consciously. You impressed more than a few of the guards out there, and I'm pleased with you."

Uly's frown had just about taken over his face. He was tempted to ask if Ryanac fooled with him, but the guard never did that, not in something like this. Ryanac meant what he said.

"You're Markis's guard. You're captain of the guard and Markis's personal bodyguard and friend." Ryanac nodded. "You pledged to protect him, Tressa, and me." The man gave another nod.

"Yes, I protect the prince, and anyone the prince takes into his heart."

"Then why do I have to learn how to fight?"

The big man looked suddenly tired. "You really need to ask?"

Uly nodded, and then shook his head. "I'm not sure. I want to hear you say it."

This time the grin seemed more like a grimace. "Because, my sweet Uly, you need to learn to protect yourself in this world. One day I might not be there to do it for you."

## Chapter Two

"I should air the tent," Ryanac muttered. Uly nodded, but made no move to leave.

The atmosphere inside the tent was difficult to describe. Although it was cooler out of the sun, the air felt stuffy, too heavy to breathe. Really, they needed to raise the edge of the tent at ground level, open the flap that served for a door, and let any breeze in. That would not allow for much privacy, however.

A look came into the big man's eyes that Uly recognised. He was certain they both spared a moment to think of Markis out there with his new bride, taking a tour of the camp so that she could introduce herself to the men. Ryanac hadn't liked the idea of Markis going alone. Uly could understand why. Ryanac was Markis's personal guard and should be at his side, but Markis had asked Ryanac to stand down. Both Uly and Ryanac understood why the prince felt it would be a good idea for him and Tressa to tour the camp alone this one time. The men had come close to dying just a short time ago. They needed to know why. The prince's reasoning was sound. That didn't mean either Uly or Ryanac had to like it.

Of course, Markis hadn't endangered everyone's lives just so he could obtain a wife who would soon rule as queen at his side. Markis had called upon the power within him and used the threat as a deterrent to forestall a war, a power that without Uly's love and Ryanac's guidance he might have lost control of. Markis still had a long way to go regarding full control, but at least he had finally cast the old ways aside.

His so-called "teachers," the seers and stargazers, were already on their way back to the Swithin City. Whenever anyone mentioned them, Ryanac would begin to curl his lip in disgust, and then straighten his face as though he caught himself doing it. Uly agreed with the sentiment. The Swithin council believed abstinence was the way for Markis to live. If they had their way, even with a bride they would have Markis remain celibate until he gained full control, and even then, Uly wouldn't put it past them to dictate the prince could

only have sex in order to procreate. They seemed to believe sex and the power were a dangerous combination. Markis's love for Uly proved them wrong, and they didn't like it. There was no love lost on either side.

Yesterday, it had felt to Uly as though they faced a new and bright beginning, but earlier this morning he'd seen a dark look cloud Ryanac's face. When he enquired, the big man muttered something about realising they had much to face, much to accomplish. Markis still needed to practice control of the comet, the power the ruling line held almost literally at their fingertips. Ryanac had also stated Tressa must learn to grow up fast. Though there was much to recommend her, she had lived a restrictive life, and Ryanac said he saw trouble ahead until she settled down and grew into the vibrant woman she would become. Aware the guard would never have spoken out of turn for nothing, Uly tried to take his comments on board. Ryanac had laughed at the expression on his face and told Uly that he also had much to learn about love, trust, and sex.

"I'm sorry I chopped your hair," Ryanac said, reaching out now to touch the shorter strands he had severed with the sword. Uly was trying to grow it. The close cut had been no accident, though Uly was certain Ryanac hadn't intended to hurt him. He was equally sure the loose hair catching the blade *was* accidental. He had no reason to question why Ryanac would reach out to him and yet he flinched back without thinking, moving even those flyaway strands out of the other man's reach. Slowly, Ryanac lowered his hand.

The large man seemed unperturbed, but Uly didn't believe it. He didn't know what to say to make it right. He thought back to the extremely early hours of the other day when they returned to the campsite with the princess and Markis had taken her into the tent to consummate the marriage. Ryanac had forced Uly to listen, to accept what must be, and even take enjoyment from it. As the small breathy sounds from inside the tent increased, Uly had fastened his hands around Ryanac's arm and wrist. He had taken one of the man's thumbs into his mouth, sucking on it for all he was worth. He could hardly believe he had done that now, especially considering the act the gesture signified.

Later, when Markis called them into the tent, each of the men had used the princess to their great delight and hers. So deflowered, her people, the Azulites, had no choice but to accept the marriage, not when they received a taste of Markis's power as well.

Later, after they made love but before Markis had faced the Azulite army, Ryanac explained the needs of the princess and that it was perfectly acceptable in Swithin society for four people to become lovers if they wanted. Maybe that was so, but no one had asked Uly's opinion. At the time, Uly went along with it. Now he wasn't sure how he felt. Although he and Ryanac hadn't done more than touch, they had watched each other, taken pleasure in the sharing. Uly couldn't understand why he'd flinched just now, but there was no denying he had.

For an instant it looked as if Ryanac would take a step back, but instead he schooled his face and looked at Uly calmly. Still, the gesture came too late. Uly frowned slightly and gave a slight shake of his head.

"It's fine," Ryanac whispered.

"No, it's not." Uly's voice was just as soft. Uly stood waiting, and as though he lost an unseen battle, Ryanac reached out to him again. This time, Uly didn't move when Ryanac's fingers brushed the side of his chin. The touch remained light, with Ryanac brushing his thumb over Uly's lips. The man's steady gaze took Uly's mind instantly back to the other night. He didn't know how he knew, but he had no doubt that Ryanac wanted him to part his lips and suck on his fingers. He was equally certain Ryanac would never suggest it. He would wait until Uly did so of his free will and accord.

"I'm never going to force you," Ryanac said, as though reading his thoughts. Perhaps he did. As time passed, they seemed able to read each other more easily. A slight breeze would have carried away the softly spoken words. Inside the tent, the air lay still and oppressive.

"I know that." Uly's lips moved against the slightly calloused thumb when he spoke. "It's just so many things have changed for me." He couldn't help displaying a rueful smile. "You're another surprise in a long list. I need time. What surprises me is that it bothers you."

Ryanac blinked. "It doesn't bother me that you need time."

Uly narrowed his gaze. "That's not what I meant and you know it. I would have thought your hands were full enough with Markis and Tressa. Why am I important to you? Why did you have to have me?"

Ryanac grinned and dropped his hand. "I haven't *had* you yet, little one." To one of Ryanac's size, he could get away with calling almost anyone little. "Are you still afraid of me?"

Uly shrugged. "Yes and no."

Ryanac laughed. "I will only hurt you if you hurt Markis."

"Then I have nothing to fear."

"Good to hear it."

"And you're trying to avoid the question."

The guard's chest expanded as he drew in a deeper breath. That chest was impressive enough without the gesture. "I don't like people who play me at my own game."

Uly had called Ryanac up more than once over his habit of manipulating others to see the truth in such a way that they could not deny it. The odd thing was Ryanac still managed to get away with it even when people knew he did such things. Uly wasn't about to be distracted. "Then you shouldn't play at all. Why am I important to you?"

"I think I *will* put you back on the waster."

"Petulant and childish. You're better than that."



Ryanac closed the already short distance between them and stared down at Uly. Uly was tall, almost as tall as Markis, yet Ryanac was larger still, not in height but in bulk. He was broader than Markis, and that made him considerably broader than Uly. Still, Uly managed to hold his ground with only a slight tremor running through him. He swallowed though, as Ryanac growled out his words.

"You're important to Markis. That makes you important to me."

A fine shiver ran through Uly, almost as if a chill hand caressed his spine. It took effort, but he finally managed to drag his gaze up to Ryanac's face. "That's all I get from you?"

Something passed through the other man's face, something dark. His hands curled and flexed, almost as though he struggled not to reach out to crush him. He leaned in, forcing Uly to tilt away. The move left Uly with no choice but to angle his head back and meet Ryanac's gaze.

"You wish to hear me say I want you?"

Uly swallowed once more. "I-I don't know," he murmured.

"Then what do you want?" Ryanac curved his lips into a tight, unforgiving smile. "Maybe you should think about such things before you try something like this with me again." He turned away and began a brisk walk across the wide tent.

"I may not know what I want, but I don't want you to just walk away from me like this."

Ryanac growled, a full-throated rumble escaping his lips, and turned back as he did. He didn't ease up or stop marching; he just changed direction. Reaching up, he caught Uly by the throat as he drew near. He dragged the younger man's face next to his. An inch of space barely separated their lips. Taking a breath seemed to cool the heat in his eyes. He took two more. "You are lucky Markis is due back, or I would show you what I want from you."

Uly clasped the arm that held him. Other than that, he did nothing to fight back; it would do him little good. He went to shake his head, but the restricting hand would not allow the movement. Instead, he spoke. "No, you wouldn't."

Ryanac growled again.

"I'm not saying I couldn't provoke you to it, but it hasn't come to that. I... trust you not to hurt me that way."

The big man's grip lessened immediately. "I never expected to hear you say that. Certainly, not yet." Ryanac shook his head and then let go. "What do you want from me?" He sounded weary.

Uly shook his head in turn. Although Ryanac let go of him, they stood close. "Nothing. It feels as though you need something."

Ryanac laughed. "From you?"

Again, Uly shook his head. "No. I don't know. Something from someone. Last night you looked at peace. Yesterday you laughed with joy, and today... Today something has changed."

Ryanac's eyes closed and then opened immediately in a long, slow blink. "Yesterday, things were simple. For the next two weeks, they are simple. When we reach the city, there will be celebrations and much joy, but Markis still has to train and he will always have the weight of duty and his power hanging over him."

Uly frowned, considering the words. "And you share this weight with him."

Ryanac hesitated. Finally, he nodded. "And now so do you. It seems cruel to say it aloud, but it is also the truth and you need to know it. To share such a man's life is to share it all, all the good and bad things that go with it. I am hoping the four of us can spread that weight nicely, but each of us will feel it at times." He grinned. "Still, I don't know about you, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

Foolishly, Uly dropped his gaze. A brief, unbidden moment of doubt speared through him and he couldn't hide it.

"Uly?" Both question and warning sounded in the way Ryanac spoke his name. "Uly, you are certain? You do love Markis?"

Uly dragged his gaze up to the other man's face, looking at him from beneath his brow. "What I feel is between me and the prince."

"You said you wouldn't hurt him. I've warned you what will happen if you do."

"So you would bind me with a threat?"

The big man jerked in response. "No," he finally allowed. The word slipped out sounding soft and apologetic. They could say more, but Uly made it clear he wanted to avoid the subject for now. Ryanac hesitated, but then dismissed Uly, sending him on some errand in preparation for Markis's return. Uly paused for a moment more at the entrance, looking back at Ryanac as the man glanced around. The sun had begun its descent and the guard would lift the flaps and cool the tent. They had said much, and things sat uneasy in Uly's heart, but there was an atmosphere surrounding the big man. It made Uly uncomfortable. Ryanac was decisive and certain always. By the comet, what was eating at him?

### Chapter Three

Markis climbed down from his mount and let one of his men take the reins. A mild surprise that the man wasn't Ryanac tightened his jaw. He didn't expect Ryanac to take care of his horse -- if anything, that would be for Uly to do -- but he had thought the man would be waiting for him upon his return. No such luck. Even Uly was tardy. He caught a glimpse of pale hair and turned his head to see Uly bobbing through the crowd, approaching at a jog. Their gazes met and Markis gave him a quick shake of his head. Uly's step faltered, and then he moved aside, taking Markis's mount from the man who held him. Guilt tightened Markis's throat, but other things occupied his mind. He might love Uly, but he couldn't protect him from everything, least of all his moods. He strode towards the tent, letting one of the men help Tressa from her horse. Not that she really needed it, but it would have been polite for him as her husband to take her hand while she dismounted. Right now, he couldn't trust himself to show her even that small courtesy.

One of the other guards lifted the flap of the tent and Markis marched in, tugging it free of the man's hand and letting it fall. He just caught sight of wide, surprised eyes before the flap fell and shut out the world. The first thing he saw inside the tent was Ryanac.

The two men had known each other since they were boys, growing up together in their homeland. They were Swithin and in time, when they came of age, it was only natural their friendship would turn to intimacy. Alas, the delight was short-lived as both young men went off to separate academies. Ryanac had trained to become part of the guard. Markis had another destiny, that of Shavar, the Comet, Lord prince regent of the Imperial Army, second only to the Swithin king. They had thought they would never see each other again, and then Markis had called for Ryanac's services. In the interim, they spent many years apart. Only recently had they rekindled their physical relationship. To say they were friends was inadequate but right now, even that didn't help.

"I was just about to let some air in," Ryanac said. He sounded as apologetic as he ever did, which was not very. What had he been doing if he hadn't time to air his prince's temporary accommodations? Aware the thought was petty, Markis couldn't help it, even clung to it.

"Leave it. I need some privacy to speak with my wife." More sarcasm than he intended laced his voice. To his irritation, Ryanac's eyes took on a familiar sparkle and the muscles around his mouth twitched. The man tried to hide his usual infuriating grin.

"I take it the period of bliss is over." The Swithin called the short time after a marriage a period of bliss. Some couples took a break from their usual routine and drowned themselves in excess, so perhaps in that "bliss" was a good description. Right now, Markis felt far removed from any state of happiness. "I have to say you've even beaten my wager. Even I didn't expect things to deteriorate quite so rapidly."

Possibly seeing that Markis was not amused, Ryanac's face turned serious. He took a step forward, a slight frown tightening his brow and the area around his eyes. The long salt and pepper hair snaked over one shoulder in a braid, the style most Swithin men chose, but today Ryanac had an additional adornment. A headband made of plaited leather and fabric sat in a circlet around his forehead. Had Ryanac been sparring again? A sneaking suspicion that the man's opponent might have been Uly made Markis feel curious enough to want to ask how well Uly had done, even though he also wanted to berate Ryanac for pushing in Uly's training. Although annoyed by the idea of Uly having to learn how to fight, Markis couldn't help wanting to know how well Uly fared. Pride from another's achievements was a strange pleasure, but one he enjoyed. However, the sound of voices approaching gave him no opportunity. Tressa was about to enter the tent. He looked directly into Ryanac's eyes. Those so dark eyes stared straight back at him, silently questioning, unblinking. "Get out," Markis said. It was all he could manage. He saw the guard's eyes widen just a little bit, and the gaze flicker over his shoulder to where the tent flap lifted. Ryanac gave a lazy blink -- the equivalent of a nod from most people -- and then he moved to walk by. Ryanac would leave the subject for now, but Markis knew him well enough to know he would want a full explanation and appraisal later. He would deal with that when the time came. For all he knew, by then his anger would have cooled and he might even be in the mood to share. For now, how to reprimand a princess escaped him. Even so, the pang of guilt at the way he spoke to his friend got the better of him. As Ryanac drew level, Markis lowered his head and his voice. Turning slightly towards his guard, he said, "Don't go far."

The simple words were inadequate but as always, Ryanac seemed to understand. He gave a simple nod, moved by, and left the tent. The heavy slap of canvas told Markis the flap closed and he and Tressa were alone. He drew in a steadying breath, reminding himself of Tressa's background. As an Azulite woman, she would have grown up in a household dominated by men. Women could hold certain positions of responsibility and yet they were to defer to men in almost all things. While he could use that to his advantage, he didn't want to. If anything, he wanted to separate Tressa from such outmoded ideas. To think that men in

this age still believed it a sin for a woman to enjoy sex. Worse still, that one sex should rule it fine for the males of the race to indulge in masturbation but call it a sin for females... As angry as he was with Tressa right now, Markis accepted that her behaviour was not entirely her fault. They had taken a liking to each other at first sight and he did not believe his estimation of her at fault. These things were to be expected. Taking a deep breath, he turned to face her, hoping that the sight of her would help. It did no such thing.

Those dark eyes regarded him, unblinking. There was no look of penitence on her face. What light filtered into the tent was fading swifter than the light outside, and so there was insufficient illumination to reflect against those dark eyes. So black were her eyes that they seemed bottomless in their intensity. Her eyes were almost as black as her hair, and as enticing. He wanted to go to her, stare into them and see where they would lead. He gritted his teeth and remained where he stood. A slight crease almost too delicate to call a frown appeared to mar her forehead. She knew he was angry with her, but she did not know why. He might have growled in frustration if it would have done any good.

At once, a coy smile touched her mouth. She sauntered over to him, swaying her hips while removing the light cloak she wore to ride. In this heat, Markis considered the garment absurd and told her as much. She had looked at him in shock and replied that for a woman to ride without such a garment would be unseemly. He'd seen her in close-fitting, more revealing garments, and yet she needed a cloak to allow her to ride. It made no sense. He had stifled a sigh while Ryanac pointedly looked away. Once more, Markis needed to remember it was not her fault.

"A tiring day, but I see the purpose," Tressa said, pulling the slide from her hair and letting the dark swells fall about her shoulders. "Would you brush out my hair?"

At any other time, he might have smiled and complied. Tonight, he was in no mood. "Is your maid unavailable?" After their secret marriage ceremony, they had returned to the Azu plains with Tressa's maid and the celebrant who performed the marriage. Both had known Tressa since she was a child. Now, Markis could only wonder how they survived all these years.

"Perhaps I would like my husband to do it." Tressa handed him the brush and turned her back to him. When he made no move towards her, she stepped back into him. He lifted the brush and let the teeth bite into the strands of her hair. Gliding it downwards, he watched even the dim light catch against that enveloping darkness. He liked the blackness of her hair. Even more than the texture, he liked the blackness. At one point during the night, he had lifted her hair and brought it across to cover his face. It felt as if he hid from the world beneath a shroud. As dark as Tressa's hair was, Uly's was pale in contrast. He loved it more. His mind instantly went to thoughts of Ryanac's hair, so dark one would have called it black unless he was standing next to Tressa. Ryanac also had the silver for contrast, of course, which made its appearance in streaks rather than sprinkled throughout. Markis tried to remember a time when there was no silver present in his friend's hair and failed.

Tressa turned her head a little, bringing him back to the task. The brush had stopped moving. He stood there like a fool holding it in the air. Markis gave himself a mental shake. Here he was, with more pressing things to deal with, and yet lost in a fantasy of all the contrasting, glorious locks he had at his disposal in which to sink his fingers. He supposed he should include his chestnut hair as well. He couldn't help it. All Swithin men were vain where their hair was concerned. He liked his hair and loved others admiring it. They considered sharing something such as grooming one's hair with anyone apart from a skilled dresser an act of intimacy. No reason he shouldn't do this for Tressa then, and take enjoyment from it, but he was angry with her and he suspected her reasons were far from romantic.

Markis stroked the brush through her hair once more and as he did, he asked casually, "Why did you react that way?"

Tressa stiffened slightly and then leaned the back of her head against his chest. She was so slight that she lacked the height to lean her head into his neck or shoulder. "You carried a common girl," she said. "Maybe I was jealous."

Good try, but he didn't think it was as simple as that. The fact that her husband had carried a "common" girl, as she put it, vexed her more, and he possessed enough sense to know what she meant by the term. "The Swithin do not have whores," he told her. Leaning over her as he brushed her hair on the left side, he witnessed a slight tightening of her face. He recognised it for a look of puzzlement.

"She seemed free and easy with the men."

"As well she might, but she is no whore. We have no need for them. We share sex freely. We take a refusal in good grace. As for how many of the guards she might be sleeping with, need I remind you that you took three men the other night, and yet now you berate her for doing the same thing?" The girl in question had flirted with more than one of the guards and left Markis with little doubt that she bedded more than one of them. Still, it was the Swithin way to take lovers of either sex, and even more than one lover at once if all concerned were happy. Tressa knew this. The promise of sexual freedom had enticed her towards accepting the marriage. Now, less than two days later, she suddenly attained airs and graces.

"I...suppose." He found it gratifying to hear her hesitate. "I am just not used to such...associations."

He considered her words while keeping the brush moving, though he no longer paid attention to what he did and certainly took no pleasure from it. The fact that she effectively removed the pleasure of the moment displeased him further. She referred to the woman's class, then. This was even more awkward for him to deal with. How could he explain his situation as prince and yet explain that he considered no man or woman beneath him? He ruled them because that was his duty, but he would not turn his back on a servant's needs any more than the needs of a noble. "I would carry a noble's daughter as much as I picked up

that woman. I would carry a servant if she needed my help just the same. I would help anyone, male, female, child or adult, whatever their station in life.”

Once more, he watched Tressa take his argument on board and try to deal with it. A pang of sympathy plagued him.

“I must accept this?”

Irritation pushed the sympathy back. “No queen of mine will look down on those she rules. I would expect you to assist anyone who needed help.”

Tressa swallowed and nodded. “Very well.”

She gave in too easily, yet did not ask enough questions. He took a hard, firm grip on her left elbow and turned her to face him. “Do you understand why I say this, or are you just accepting it as an order?”

She frowned openly now. “You are my husband, I must--”

He gave her a slight shake and she let out a small gasp. “I did not marry a puppet. I want you to speak the truth.”

“Even if that means we disagree?”

He hesitated, but the question was fair, even if she said it purposely to goad him. “Even so.”

“And you will try to persuade me to your line of thinking.” The accusation hung in the air.

“Tressa, your background alone dictates that we will have differences. I do not wish to add my voice to the problems we face. I have no desire to control your thoughts, but in some things I will dictate your actions, but only if they go against the ways of my people and harm someone. The things you did today were simple enough in some ways but not in others, in that they could cause an incident. Still, it would please me greatly if you’ll listen to what I have to say on such matters. You don’t have to agree, but I want you to understand my reasoning.” She looked thoughtful and then nodded.

“I will...try,” she allowed at last.

“Good. To start, explain your point of view.”

She sighed. “Can we not just drop this?”

“No. This is not how you acted the other night. What is wrong with you?”

Her next breath came out on a laugh. “I have already explained that I hated you picking up a common girl. I am sorry if you see her another way. I had no idea. I saw it as no insult at the time.”

“The way you glared at me made it clear how you felt, and you insulted and embarrassed me by your actions.”

“Fine!” Tressa shrugged off his hand. “It will not happen again.”

Markis stifled a groan. In one breath, she seemed to understand and in the other, they were fighting again. "See it from my viewpoint. I picked up a woman who twisted her ankle. That was all. It was an act of kindness, of aid, from one person to another. You once said, and I quote, 'I treat others as they treat me.' What has changed? Do you consider your maid beneath you?"

"I do not consider..." She paused. "Idelle is not beneath me, but where I come from, her position in life would dictate her treatment and yes, women are as guilty of that as men. I did say that, about how I treat others. I meant it. I just did not mean..."

"Idelle and people like her." Markis filled in the blanks.

Tressa's teeth tugged at her lower lip, a habit she shared with Uly. When he first saw it, it pleased him. Right now, it only irritated. "I am sorry, but where I come from a man does not pick up just any woman in his arms."

"No. He would let her crawl on her hands and knees." Markis sighed deliberately to let her hear it. "You still haven't answered part of my question. Why are you so different today? I do not want to tear you from your past, but part of the reason you came to me was to be free of your nation's views. This does not just include sex in the privacy of our bedroom, but in everything that you do."

Her face twisted a little, took on a childlike petulance. "Maybe I was a little jealous too."

He lifted her face by hooking a finger under her chin. "I take it while I am to share you with other men, you want me to have no other women." He spoke teasingly, but at once, she frowned, narrowing her gaze. Her gaze seemed to flicker, searching.

"I...never guessed, never thought..." She clearly floundered for words.

Markis tilted his head to the side to look at her. "It is the Swithin way if all concerned are happy. We've been over this."

She appeared to struggle with the idea. "Does that mean you *want* another woman?"

Despite his weariness, Markis gave a soft laugh. "No. I think I have my hands quite full enough." He watched her face. "You don't hate the idea of me with Uly, or even Ryanac. Why does another woman bother you?"

Tressa managed a small smile. "I guess it is coming from a race where the women are more highly sexed than the men. It feels right for me to have more than one lover, but the idea of you..."

"Uly is my lover. So is Ryanac."

She waved a hand in a dismissive gesture that Markis failed to understand. Before he could question her, her smile turned sweet. She leaned into him. "I am tired. Let us talk about this another day."

He hesitated and then nodded. "Very well. Just no more hissy fits next time I pick up a woman who has twisted her ankle, especially if she wouldn't have twisted it if you hadn't



backed into her.” He stepped away and put down the brush. He meant the comment as a light parting remark, but to his dismay, Tressa didn’t take it that way.

“I would not have backed into her if that man had not offered me a drink from his cup. You should teach your men better manners.”

“He offered you a drink of Swithin brandy and by refusing to drink from the same cup you insulted him.” He watched Tressa’s eyes widen in surprise and horror. So, it wasn’t the alcohol she had refused. She disliked sharing the cup with someone she considered beneath her. Thankfully, in the ensuing confusion, while they took care of the young woman’s twisted ankle, they had overlooked the snub. Now he understood the reason for it. At this rate, he was in for a long night.

“You are fooling?” Her shock was clearly genuine.

Markis shook his head. “No. It is common for a guard of semari or sedryche rank to offer a commanding officer, or someone of higher rank, a cup from which he has already sipped. The gesture’s symbolic. It shows his willingness to put his life on the line for the one to whom he offers the drink. In other words, he would drink or eat first in case of poison. That man paid you a high compliment and you, no matter how unwittingly, threw it back in his face.”

“So we should just drink from any cup someone has sipped from? What if the person is willing to die just to see the end of you?”

“I’m not saying that, but the man was trustworthy. I wouldn’t have allowed it if I thought otherwise. I’ve known Antal since he was a child. His father serves my father and the son has come to serve me.”

Tressa dropped her gaze. “Then I am sorry,” she said a moment later, “something which I seem to be saying rather a lot of just now.”

“Apology accepted. Now I ask one small favour of you. I want you to ride back to them tomorrow. We will sip from the same cup as Antal and take something to the woman” -- he paused, annoyed he didn’t know the female’s name -- “to cheer her up.” Tressa’s mouth opened and closed. Her lips pursed a little and he could see that, despite her apology, she didn’t like the idea. “Tressa, why are you behaving this way? I honestly never thought you would see anyone as beneath you, not from the way you treat your maid and other things I’ve seen, and despite what you say, that is how it appears to me.”

From the set of her jaw, he could see she wouldn’t answer him. He gave up the argument. “I would like you to do this because it is right, but I will ask you to do it for me if I have to.” His patience wore thin despite his sympathy for her predicament. Markis tried to imagine how he would feel, suddenly thrust into her nation’s ways and views. He couldn’t manage it. To his horror, rather than reply to him, Tressa sauntered over. She turned into him and leaned back, once more gathering up his hand and drawing it around her waist.

The gown she wore was a lighter material than her usual garments, but the terrain was dry from here to the Swithin City. Desert would gradually give way to an oasis. Once they

reached the cliffs, they would pass through an isthmus and on the other side, the land would grow gentle until they finally reached the Swithin City, offset against a backdrop of mountains. It was there, in open farmland, that Ryanac had grown up, and Markis had often run out of the lower confines of the palace to the farm to be with his friend while they were boys. He would not be returning to the lighter life of the lesser palace, however. This time, Markis would live in the main fortress with three people at his side. He had yet to see what his father, the king, thought of the strange troop he was bringing home to share his rooms and his life.

A sigh escaped Tressa's lips. She leaned into him, running her hand along his arm. "Let us not talk about such things tonight. I long to start my life as your wife."

Start? She barely gave him time to recover. They had spent one night as a quartet and one night alone, just the two of them. The fourth time last night, Markis had to bring her to orgasm with his lips, as the rest of him was exhausted. He lacked sleep when they weren't travelling and, today, when he could have done with a rest, he'd spent his time on a horse touring the camp. Tressa couldn't seriously want sex...

Markis suppressed his own sigh. As tired as he felt, Markis would have liked to believe Tressa's words, give in to the idea that she wanted to set irritations aside so they could cast themselves into the simplicity of pleasuring one another. Alas, he did not believe her. She meant to seduce him and hope that in the morning he would have forgotten the incident. Very well, if that was how she wanted to play things.

Markis tightened his grip around her waist. He leaned down so that first his breath and then his hot tongue stirred against the curve of her ear. Tressa closed her eyes and that small, cat-like, almost smug smile he had quickly grown accustomed to, sat easy on her lips.

"What do you want, my love?"

If she had asked that a few days from now, he would have believed it. Right now, although they liked one another, and he remained certain that in time it would grow into love, neither held any illusions. They had married for convenience and duty. That they liked each other was an additional benefit. She should save calling him her love until a more appropriate time.

"I want to draw on your needs, bring them forth, make you gasp and shudder against me," Markis whispered into her ear, leaning more fully over her and trailing his lips down the side of her neck. His words seemed to surprise Tressa. Her eyes shot open and her mouth parted a little in shock. It took only a moment to witness the suspicion war with delight and by then he was kissing and licking her neck, making her shiver and sending little sparks through her that surely caused her nipples to harden. With one hand, he casually trailed a finger over one, confirming the suspicion.

"You've never had a man who could recognise your needs, have you, Tressa?" he whispered, keeping his voice as soft as his wandering lips and fingers. "You've had a lover, somehow, some time, but it was no doubt hurried. You've made poor attempts at self-

gratification, the ebb on your desire so short-lived it only increased your frustration.” Her father had used one of the rarely used indulgences his race allowed a man of the house -- he had kept his daughter in a chastity belt and only through Uly’s skills at thievery, they retrieved the key and freed her. Surely that had gone a long way towards helping her make the decision to marry him. “I know a man taking you, using every inch of you, is the only thing that will meet your needs. Isn’t that right, lovely Tressa?” He wove his fingers into her hair, tugging just enough to draw back her head to expose her throat. Her eyes closed in response. “You need a man, a real man, not some Azulite fop.”

He made sure his voice vibrated and whispered along her throat as he spoke, using the simple act of speech as another tool to arouse her. Her skin took on a rosy flush. She let out a soft laugh as he blew against her neck. “That tickles.”

Markis dropped both hands to her hips and then trailed them slowly across to, and up, over her stomach. When he reached her breasts, he cupped them gently, as surprised now as when he first held them. They were just large enough to be a handful, like her buttocks. Tressa was tiny, a woman some might consider frail, but she had curves where they mattered. Despite his irritation with her, his erection was genuine. He couldn’t stop her feeling the evidence of it either, not that there was any real reason to hide it. He let her writhe against that hardness and closed his eyes for a moment. A flash of white-gold entered his vision and that was never a good thing. The comet hung just out of reach somewhere inside him. He need only to reach for it...

Intense feelings sometimes brought his power forth when he had no desire for it. Lust and desire, and even love, seemed to be emotions the comet liked to play with, and it acted benevolent then, or he could at least maintain control. Alas, feelings such as annoyance had the opposite effect. He might lust for Tressa, he might desire to pick her up in his arms and shake her into seeing reason so he could have his way with her and they could fall in love in the instant. It would favour neither of them, however. He didn’t expect or even want Tressa always to agree with him, but she would be the Swithin queen, and even if she did it with a smile that hid the grit of her teeth, there were certain manners and customs she would have to follow. As soon to be king, as Shavar, as her husband, as a man who cared what happened to her, Markis needed to show her games would not work with him.

His racing heart caused his cock to throb. It made the ache in his heart worsen. He wanted to draw her into his arms, to tilt her back so that he could press his lips upon hers and show her how life was going to be between them. “You don’t have to be lonely anymore, sweet Tressa,” Markis said softly, and he meant it, but he turned his thoughts aside from her. He filled his thoughts with images of Uly. He had to, for so far that proved a sure way to control the comet. His movements were mechanical but so starved of sex, love, and intimate companionship was Tressa that he was certain she wouldn’t notice. The pang of what he was doing softened his erection. He knew very well what it was like to have intimacy denied, especially so if you found someone to love, had someone who loved you at your side.

He let his hands wander down to her hips and then lower, leaning over her now so that his body encompassed hers, and moved his hands inward to press against the firm flesh of her mons. Tressa groaned, though he didn't need to hear her cry to know his deftly pressing fingers aroused her. He could well imagine the growing moisture that would soon make her undergarments uncomfortable. Drawing his hands back up, he traced the line of fastenings at her stomach. A column of small hooks held the gown together at the front. As he sucked and bit on her neck, Markis wormed his fingers between the sections.

The sound of ripping filled the tent and this time, Tressa's cry was one of shock. Markis blinked with her, surprised at how much he had ruined the garment. Tressa would need something else to wear tomorrow. Her breasts spilled free and he caught them in his hands. The soft yielding flesh made his hands feel hard and clumsy. If the slight roughness of his skin irritated her, she made no complaint. Indeed, as he stroked his fingers over her erect nipples, she rolled her shoulders so that the tattered remains of the dress slipped down. The dress caught on her hips and the one arm that remained in a sleeve up to her elbow. She caught one of his hands and forced it downward, annoying him further. While he understood her sense of urgency, Tressa would have to learn how to take pleasure, true pleasure, not a hurried coupling as though they were wild animals. Markis liked to take his time. The Swithin preferred one unhurried, satisfying fuck over several quick and short-lived matings. He couldn't help but initially resist her feeble attempts at guidance, but when he felt her sharp little nails digging into his hand and he recognised the small sound she made as one of impatience, he let her fingers take over. His fingers snaked down past the gaping edge of the skirt, into the soft frilled edge of her underwear and into a soft tickling bush of hair. Even aware of his plan he couldn't help but smile a little at how soft and satiny that felt.

She sagged a little as his fingers encountered the fleshy lips of her sex. They gaped, wet and grasping, and with no more thought, Markis slipped two fingers into her. Her slickness coated his fingers. Tressa quivered, hesitated. Her tension screamed of uncertainty, and then she lost control and began to ride his hand. Markis almost chuckled. No doubt, she thought to do so was unladylike, but she had given in, her need taking control of her actions. Her juices poured out, coating his hand and she tried to tilt her pelvis, searching for just the right friction, but he used his other hand to hold her, to deny her. The smell of her lust rose to perfume the air, a warm musk that turned his vision sightless. He breathed in her scent and had no trouble believing his pupils dilated. She was close but not quite close enough. When she whispered a small plea asking to have him inside her, he pulled his fingers free and turned her about.

Crushing her small frame against his clothes made her yelp. The contrasting hardness had to do things to her abused and aroused flesh. He spared a thought to whether those things were good or bad. Markis drew her up against him and he kissed her, but the kiss was harsh, not quite hard enough to be brutal, but containing more contempt than love. He took a moment to pull back, look down into her eyes, and trace her lower lips with his slick fingers. Then he took her by the upper arms and pushed her away from him. Tressa stumbled

back. She lifted a hand as though to cover herself, and then let it fall, only to look up and search his eyes. Whatever she saw there made her pull her dress together.

"I wish you a good night, Tressa," Markis murmured. "I think I will find...*other* accommodations."

His small wife blinked, confusion giving way to disbelief and anger. "You are aroused, I know you are. You want me."

He nodded. "You're right. I do. Nonetheless, I already intended to spend this night of all nights with another. That, however, is not the reason I am leaving you alone tonight."

"Alone?" Tressa smirked. "What if I call your guard into me or that pretty brat of yours?"

"As you have just said, Ryanac is *my* guard. As for Uly, he's no brat, but he's mine also." Brat was a derogatory term Uly's race used for those under the age of twenty-five who roamed the streets. Hearing the term from Tressa's lips made Markis grit his teeth. He was sick of the expression and in the mood to threaten anyone who used it hence. "They will not come to you against my wishes and neither will any other." For the first time, he saw genuine fright in her eyes and, though it gave him a brief, perverse kind of pleasure, it threatened to undo him. Markis wanted to give in to her but things had progressed too far for that. If he gave in now, they would have no respect for one another. "This isn't to punish you. It's to give you time to think."

"Not to punish?" An incredulous tone crept into her voice. "You arouse me and then leave..."

He laughed. The sound was short and sharp, callous. "You thought to addle me with sex. You did this due to what Azulite men think of other men in the world who take pleasure from intercourse. It does not work, but if I told you rather than showed you, you would never have believed it." He stared down into her eyes, trying his best to give her nothing, no comfort other than what she might glean from his words. "You tried to control me like a petulant child. I want no conniving princess by my side. I want a queen. I want a woman. Be the woman I know you can be, that you deserve to be, the woman who spoke in such a forthright manner when first we met. Another night I will ask you again what is wrong with you, why you are acting like this, and I will want a true answer. To use seduction against the Swithin is a grievous insult. Don't ever try to control me like that again. *That* is what I leave you to think on."

As he turned to leave the tent, the last thing Markis saw of the small princess was a delicate hand fluttering to lie against a pale and vulnerable-looking throat. Much to his irritation, he still wanted to kiss it.

## Chapter Four

Emerging from the tent, Markis blinked. A stray beam of light found its way across the flat expanse of land directly into his eyes and blinded him. Disconcerted, he blinked several times trying to clear his vision. His eyes watered slightly and the idea that it might be more than tears from the pain made him feel uneasy. The setting sun had done its damage to his sight. He should have been able to see more even with the fading light, but everything looked like black shapes against a grey backdrop. He took a tentative step forward, still blinking, trying to will the spots dancing before his eyes away. He only recognised Ryanac because of the other man's bulk.

"Where's Uly?" Markis winced. He didn't like the desperation in his voice.

"I've sent him on an errand. He'll be gone for at least two hours."

Ryanac's words startled him. Markis frowned in puzzlement. "What did you do that for?" His voice sounded more shocked than angry, but he did nothing to hide his displeasure. He couldn't make out his friend's face but he could feel Ryanac's gaze. When Ryanac turned aside, Markis fell into step beside him. That he knew Ryanac expected him to follow annoyed him further. What was wrong with him tonight? Every little thing struck Markis as an irritation. It made him want to scratch almost as if ants crawled over his skin. When Ryanac lifted the flap of a smaller tent, Markis only hesitated for a second and then ducked his head to enter. The tent was full of spare supplies. It contained one of the platforms some of them used for a bed while travelling. This one was smaller than his was, though. Dim light filtered into the tent. As he turned to look back at Ryanac, the last of the light caught his friend's face where he stood in the entrance, the flap held back by one large hand.

Markis opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again. His gaze flickered over the contours of Ryanac's face. That visage was rugged. Ryanac's designation suited him. Just as Markis was Shavar, the Comet, Ryanac was Silas. The name meant forest-dweller, a man of

the woods, of the land. Indeed, although Markis rarely saw Ryanac out of armour, his bronzed skin gave him the appearance of one who spent much of his time out of doors, as if the sun had formed a permanent attachment for the man. The idea that the sun loved Ryanac as much as he did brought a small smile to Markis's lips. This night of all nights, he was grateful for it.

The long, dark, silver-streaked hair lay in a braid that matched Markis's own in terms of length and style. Even a few of the hairs in Ryanac's eyebrows possessed a slight silver sheen, though one needed to be close to him to notice. The peculiarity of the man's hair was nothing to do with age. Markis tried to recall if Ryanac's father had grey in his hair, but that time when they worked and played on the farm seemed so distant now. When Markis thought back to those times, other, more pressing memories dominated his mind, pushing back such small considerations. He and Ryanac were the same age. Either the silver in his friend's hair was due to heritage, or were due to things the man had seen on the battlefield. More likely, it was a combination of these. Thinking back provided the answer to the first question. No. The silver had not been present when they were young and had left for separate academies. By the time Markis set eyes on his friend again, the silver was an addition much like the fine scar that ran a short way down the side of Ryanac's left cheek. The blemish did little to mar him. The line was fine, paler flesh than the surrounding skin, but it caught the eye. Still, even if the scar were worse, Markis doubted it would have done much to detract from that handsome face. Rugged, woody, wild, and even wolf-like, Ryanac's dark eyes studied him, and then the man dropped the tent flap as he advanced.

Resisting the sudden urge to step back, Markis stood his ground, a frown threatening. He didn't like the look he had seen in Ryanac's eyes just before the tent flap dropped and yet, at the same time, he did. He tried to swallow, aware his throat felt suddenly dry. A brief glance at the few items surrounding the pallet was enough to tell him this was Ryanac's bed. Of course, the chances were he would have slept in Markis's tent or just outside it. Ryanac would be wherever Markis slept, and not just for personal reasons but for a sense of duty. Ryanac would not have left Tressa unattended, so he must have set a trustworthy guard over her even in the midst of a large camp containing their own men. The troop counted roughly a thousand men. They were safe enough, yet Markis never doubted Ryanac made certain he, Uly, and Tressa were always attended in some way. Whatever pretence Ryanac used to send Uly away tonight, he would have set a good man at his side. The act *was* for some pretence; Markis felt sure of that now. For some reason, Ryanac had sent Uly away from him for a short time. He should have been surprised, but he wasn't. No more than it came as any surprise that Ryanac would have sought out a quiet place, even if he spent little time here.

They were as good as the same height. They stood with no more than half a dozen paces separating them. Markis swallowed and lifted his head. Though they could barely make out each other's features now the flap had closed, he was Shavar and he would face the man before him even if he felt as uncertain as he had all those many years ago when they

first made love. Ryanac had been his first male lover; Uly, his second. There were no others. He doubted there ever would be.

Markis opened his mouth to speak and Ryanac closed that small distance, filling the gap made by his parted lips with his. One hand snaked around the back of Markis's neck to grip the base of his skull and, as he automatically closed his eyes, Markis became aware of the heat of that hand burning into his head, and ultimately into his mind. The world drew down to the passion of Ryanac's deep invasion, the dry musk that was all Ryanac's smell, and the closeness of the moment. When they finally broke apart, Markis blinked and opened his eyes to search his friend's face. "What brought that on?" he whispered.

He received no answer. His friend's dark eyes took him in, that quiet gaze all-consuming. "This is rather in the way, don't you think?"

It took Markis a moment to realise his friend referred to his clothing, and by then Ryanac's hands were moving deftly, separating hooks and unfastening buckles. Markis had gone out with only light armour today, believing to do otherwise would be an insult to the men protecting him, as well as stifling. Now he was in two minds as to whether the idea was a good one. The uniform was quite easy to remove but, seeing the look in Ryanac's eye, Markis wasn't sure he wanted to be naked. He lifted a hand in a stalling gesture only to have it slapped away. Ryanac's hand gripped and wrapped his braid into a coil. He used the grip to jerk Markis slightly to one side and to press them together. Once more, the dim view of the tent was lost to his sight as Markis's eyes automatically closed for the kiss. His friend's free hand ran over his body through what remained of the outfit.

"Off," Ryanac grunted, and Markis only hesitated a moment. He felt strangely adrift, disconnected from what was happening. A peculiar atmosphere invaded the tent and he suspected that it largely came from Ryanac. Whatever goaded the man to these actions, whether it was love, lust, or both, he didn't feel as though Ryanac would accept a refusal. More than that, Markis didn't feel he had the right to refuse. That was crazy, of course. Sex was a thing only freely given, never taken. That was the Swithin way. On top of that, he was Shavar; he was a prince. Still, bare-chested now, it felt as if he had no say, no control. Markis opened his mouth, unsure what he intended to say, and what left his lips was a gasp. Ryanac jerked them together so that the harshness of buckles, belts, and studs, impaled his naked, vulnerable flesh, and beneath all that, he could feel the hardness of Ryanac himself. As Ryanac used one hand to press them together and the other slipped lower to cup his backside, it left Markis with no doubt that his friend knew exactly how this felt and what it was doing to him. Both grips tightened and his body gave of its own volition. Hard, unforgiving adornments rubbed at sensitive areas, stroked his nipples to peaks. His back arched a little, forcing the heat of their groins together. Ryanac pulled back just enough so that the last of the light caught one of his eyes. The pupil glittered and then the man leaned in to whisper.



"I'm going to fuck you," Ryanac said softly, calmly, evenly. There was no question in that statement, no seeking permission. "I'm going to fuck you," Ryanac whispered, "and you are going to love it."

A perfectly situated hook of his leg flipped Markis backward. If Ryanac hadn't followed him down onto the bed it might have hurt, but his guard knew how to hold him, how to lower him. Ryanac possessed the strength and Markis had only a moment to wonder why he even wanted to fight it.

Markis didn't know if he should feel grateful for the lack of light or sorry for it. Ryanac was this huge shadow moving over him, but he could see enough. Markis knew enough of Ryanac's body that he could have walked his fingers over it as though he were guiding his guards over a map. He longed for light to see the beautiful sight, but something strange was happening between them tonight, and darkness seemed right for it. Ryanac knelt back, deftly removing his garments, and Markis forced himself to lie still and wait. By the time Ryanac eased down over him and Markis felt the pressure of all that glorious muscled weight, his cock ached. A hot tongue traced a line up his throat and hot fingers stroked the length of his shaft through the thin undergarment that was his last article of clothing. Ryanac was completely naked. That didn't seem right or even appropriate. It certainly wasn't fair.

"Shh, not too much noise, now. I don't want anyone to come in trying to rescue you."

Markis blinked. He hadn't noticed he made any sound. The idea he did without even knowing was somehow embarrassing. Ryanac's chuckle came out of the gloom and snaked around the interior of the tent just as slithering and somehow as phallic as the reptile. "You make more sound than you know," Ryanac told him.

Markis swallowed. He would have to pay more attention, and then he lost the thought as Ryanac groped him above and below. It was over too quickly, and yet, even so, as Ryanac eased off and Markis opened his eyes and mouth in protest, he acknowledged the effect was interesting. His breathing grew heavier; he grew harder; he grew wet. Moisture gathered at the tip of Markis's cock and, almost as though he knew it, Ryanac slipped his fingers in beneath the linen waistband, tugged the last garment down to his hips, and then off. A warm hand finally sought out his aching member but it was only to gather up the moisture. Markis grunted, annoyed that such a low, desperate sound should escape his lips. He gritted his teeth to prevent it happening again, only to have his body ignore him and a lesser but still undeniable grunt force its way out of his throat. Hot fingers stroked his face gently.

"Open your mouth. Give me your tongue." Ryanac's words were so softly spoken it took a moment for their actual meaning to burst brightly inside Markis's mind. By that time, some unconscious part of him must have understood, for he'd already parted his lips. Warm, moist fingers stroked his tongue leaving the tang of sex in his mouth, then Ryanac's lips pressed tightly over his. Their tongues danced in the taste of salt, and beneath that, the taste of each other. The guard smelt of warmth and musk. Even Uly said as much. His taste was so

similar to these things that try as he might, Markis couldn't liken it to anything else. To smell Ryanac, to taste him, was to gather up warmth. That scent invaded the senses, made you feel safe, and reminded you of home.

*Safe.* Even when Ryanac gathered up his wrists in a single huge hand and pressed them back in a long line over the top of his head, Markis allowed it. Besides, it felt a little strange, but not what you could call unpleasant. It wouldn't be the first time Ryanac took control of things. Of course, many years ago, Markis had no experience of men. He had been leaving to take on the role of Shavar. Duty, power, and control would dominate the rest of his life. Inexperienced and facing a restrictive future, it had only seemed right to let his friend lead. Now... He should at least ponder what had changed and, in many ways, that meant accepting nothing had. For now, Ryanac remained the more experienced lover. A decade of enforced celibacy had seen to that, and as for duty, Markis would always have the weight of the world and the comet on his shoulders. So, yes, let Ryanac pin him lightly to the bed. He could cope with that if Ryanac just kept kissing him like this...

A sharp, snapping sound filled the air and Markis opened his eyes, his mouth parting and drawing back from the kiss in shock. He tugged on his hands, but they wouldn't come free. Tilting his head back, he could barely see the dark circlets of the hostage cuffs that encircled his wrists. He could certainly feel them, though. Ryanac had chained him to the bloody pallet!

That insidious chuckle resonated in his ear. "You said you never could tell when they would come in handy."

He had said that a long time ago when he captured Uly trying to steal his purse. At the time, Ryanac was surprised to discover that Markis carried a set. The cuffs consisted of three loops -- one for each wrist, and the third to go around a guard's wrist, a restraining belt a guard could wear, or anything else it could fit. In this case, the third loop fastened around one of the wooden struts of the pallet. The makeshift bed would be uncomfortable if not for the bedroll spread out on top.

Only a high-ranking guard or a Swithin noble knew how to undo the cuffs. Markis could unfasten them if he could just reach...

"Oh, no, you don't." Those huge hands fastened around his waist and pulled him back down the bed.

"Are you crazy?" The words left his lips without thought.

"This doesn't seem to think so." Ryanac bent awkwardly and took Markis's cock into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the ridge and gathering up any leaking moisture from the tip. He made appreciative noises in his throat that caused Markis to arch his back on the bed. Before he lay flat again and before his mind kicked back into gear, Ryanac's heat enveloped him. The sheer weight of the man pinned him down.

"I said shhh. Do I have to gag you, too?"

Had he been making noises again? Markis licked his lips. The brief panic eased. A strange bubble of laughter threatened to rip out of him. An unwarranted or unwelcome touch upon Shavar could warrant death. What penalty could the council come up with for someone tying him up and gagging him?

“What?” Even in the dark, it seemed that Ryanac could sense his mood.

Markis shook his head. “Nothing. I’ll tell you later.”

“You’ll tell me when I say,” Ryanac replied, and the tone of his voice made Markis swallow again, though he doubted it had anything to do with what the man said. Ryanac stroked his face, his eyes, and then his brow. Markis could barely make out his friend in the gloom, but it occurred to him that maybe Ryanac could see a little better from his position on top. Markis couldn’t see those dark eyes, but he certainly felt them staring down. The panic returned, unexpected, overwhelming, and Markis suddenly writhed. Ryanac didn’t seem to mind, but there was no way Markis could throw him off, chained as he was. The guard let him struggle, breathing out a sigh as skin and muscles rubbed back and forth. That sigh made Markis lie still.

The ensuing laughter insulted his sense of fairness, but Markis could only accept that he could do nothing. Ryanac would let him up when he felt like it. The only other thing Markis could do was call the comet or shout for help. Both were liable to be dangerous and he didn’t want to threaten Ryanac with either. As long as he had no wish to hurt his friend, Ryanac had him just where he wanted and knew it, was even enjoying it. The trouble was, to his utter consternation, Markis was enjoying it, too.

As Markis decided to hold still, Ryanac moved. This time, the friction proved less random. Cock stroked against cock. Markis tried to hold still but felt the tension rise. The sound that came out of his throat he would have found difficult to describe. Ryanac’s movements were slow, unhurried, and shouldn’t have clouded his mind to such a degree, but all Markis could think of right now was how good it felt to have all that solidity rubbing up against him. They were roughly the same height. Head to toe, every inch of him met defined and unforgiving muscle, and in the centre of that, silken skin grew slick with their mingling juices while hardness rubbed against hard length.

Ryanac’s movements were still too slow and unhurried for his liking. Markis writhed once more, but this time he wasn’t trying to get away. He tried to entice Ryanac into a dance of another kind, one that involved lips and tongues, as well as other things. He heard that infuriating chuckle and whispered, “Please,” against Ryanac’s lips.

“Oh, I could make you beg.” Ryanac spoke with their lips still pressing together, so that the sound vibrated against Markis’s mouth, and the soft breath tickled over his face, “And I could so easily go in for a little frottage with you if I didn’t want to fuck you so much.”

Again, something existed in the man’s tone that caused a shiver to run up Markis’s spine, and it wasn’t all to do with desire and excitement. In that moment, it felt as if he played with a wild cat’s cub. They were cute and cuddly, so beautiful that you ached to reach

out and touch them, until they turned on you. Then they were a hissing bundle of sharp teeth and claws. Markis didn't really believe that Ryanac would ever harm him, but a strange tension positively thrummed through the man right now.

"What--" Markis opened his mouth to ask what was up with him tonight when the feel of Ryanac's hands gripping his shoulders and pinning him back cut off his words. Markis grunted this time in slight pain, as Ryanac's fingers pressed painfully into his clavicle bones. His eyes went wide in disbelief, wider still when he realised that Ryanac knew that hurt. Even as he accepted his surprise, Markis also realised the pain was no mistake. Like all of the guard's movements, it was deliberate. To his horror, the short, sharp pain stiffened his cock.

The pain wasn't what caused it, though. It was the fact that he lay here at Ryanac's mercy. Well, he didn't have to. He could call the comet and Ryanac knew that, but as he had already observed, Markis had no wish to hurt his friend like that. He held on to that thought, that they were friends, and he had no reason not to trust this man with his life. He had done so on several occasions.

*I trust you.* The thought slowed his beating heart. Ryanac gave a slight jerk of his head, and there was something triumphant in the movement.

The guard leaned over him now, up on his knees, almost on all fours. He leaned in, dipping his head. That soft, deep voice seduced him. "Shh, Markis. You know I won't hurt you...much."

That promise both calmed and scared him a little, though in different ways. "I could order you off." It sounded churlish, but he should give it a shot. He caught sight of Ryanac's grin as the man turned his head a little. It would be much brighter outside the tent, but in here what light was available rippled, gave off distorted images. He could see the lower part of Ryanac's face now, but not his eyes.

"Try," was the only reply. Despite the challenge in the voice, it sounded as though Ryanac meant it.

"Get. Off." Markis tried to put as much command into his voice as he could. It came out as a rather poor effort.

"And if I don't?"

Warm, slightly rough fingers ran up and down his sides. Markis gritted his teeth. The touch tickled just the right side of annoying. "I order you to get off me." He wasn't even sure that was what he wanted, but irritation often won out. A golden abyss hovered within reach of his fingertips. Quickly, he invoked an image of Uly and slammed a door shut on it. Some might consider it a strange technique but it seemed to work sufficiently, though he needed more practice.

"Can't do that." Ryanac shook his head. The long braid of silver and black hair wriggled against the line of his chest and stroked against Markis's stomach. Markis twisted, tugging on the cuffs inadvertently, mindless of the fact that they bit into his wrists.

“Get the fuck off of me. By order of Shavar...”

The rest Markis lost, the commanding tone hissing off as Ryanac took hold of his salt and pepper braid between two fingers and used the tail end of it to brush over Markis’s nipples. Ryanac backed the gesture up with a resounding, “No.”

With his other hand, Ryanac took hold of his sizable cock and began to stroke it. Markis, speechless now, swallowed and turned his gaze to that thick member. Even in the dark, he could judge its size. He knew from experience.

“You want to touch?” The deep, resonant voice sounded teasing. Markis closed his eyes. Those huge hands gathered him up in reply. Gripped around the hips and pulled down onto Ryanac’s lap left Markis no choice but to let his legs fall back. Still, Ryanac dragged him as far down the bed as the cuffs would allow. Stretched out like this, Markis could gain no advantage. He couldn’t protect himself as the heat of a flickering tongue over his nipples demonstrated. He cried out, unable to contain the sound. Ryanac quickly moved to silence the cry with his lips, but the awkwardness of it brought Markis’s knees towards his head, exposing everything to the heat in Ryanac’s crotch.

“Don’t,” Markis managed to whisper as Ryanac broke the kiss. He hated the wavering sound of real fear that emerged. Gentle fingers brushed his forehead, his face. The other hand slipped between them, and he suddenly felt a hot, slick roundness rub against his opening.

“Tell me you don’t want this,” Ryanac whispered, and he didn’t have to say more for Markis to understand. Force wasn’t the way of the Swithin. He could say no. If he meant it, the other man would stop. The trouble was now Markis didn’t know if he could say a word. “Tell me no,” Ryanac said again, rocking his hips as he did. Markis couldn’t, wouldn’t. He just knew he wasn’t going to say a thing.

It hurt -- not as much as it could but more than it should. It hurt because Ryanac wanted him to feel it. The guard used spit to ease the way, but it wasn’t the best thing to use. Markis didn’t know why Ryanac wanted him to feel the pain of it and he could tell Ryanac to stop if he wanted it to end, but he wouldn’t. The pain wasn’t what you could call good, but it wasn’t what you could describe as entirely bad. He wanted to call it spiking, searing, burning, and yet at the same time he didn’t want it to stop. That way surely led to madness. Why would you wish for any kind of pain? Yet, even as Markis argued with his emotions, the answers lay on some instinctual level. Underneath the pain lay the promise that in a moment it was going to feel so *damn* good...

A jolt of pain interrupted the underlying sensations. “By the Comet, Ryanac, go easy.” Markis spoke without thinking, needing to plead, but also a little wary of how the comet would respond if some deep part of his psyche truly believed he faced danger.

“You can take me.” The comment hardly seemed reassuring, but Ryanac certainly seemed to believe his words. “Grin and bear it. Let me fill you up.”

Any other time, he might have agreed on all counts but he still struggled against the idea that Ryanac wanted to hurt him. It wasn't true hurt, of course. It wouldn't even be long-lasting, but *why...* "Aaahhhiiiiyyyyyyyy." As the entire length filled him, Markis let out a shout. He blinked in surprise when the sound reached his ears, muffled. Apparently, Ryanac knew what to expect for he had placed a hand over Markis's mouth. He didn't fight it, argue, or complain in any way, for as Ryanac began to pull back, he cried out again. Ryanac reared up, letting go of his mouth, taking his hands to Markis's hips and using that amazing power in those muscular hands and arms to hold him exactly where he wanted. Either Ryanac didn't think Markis would make another sound or he no longer cared. As Markis realised the only sounds coming from his lips now were low and garbled, it occurred to him how much a lover could know you better than you knew yourself. His guard speared into him, drawing the need back and forth like an incoming tide. There was something brutal in the way Ryanac fucked him, and yet something endearing in his touch. Even though he had no say over what was happening, Markis never once doubted that Ryanac was with him every step of the way.

Only when he wrapped his legs around the other man's waist, did Ryanac come down over him. The steady, frantic pounding eased, though Markis was no longer sure that was what he wanted. He couldn't use his hands and the fine line of hair softening Ryanac's stomach whispered over Markis's cock, threatened to take him to the edge. His body danced of its own accord. The grip of his legs tightened. He rolled his hips, thrust up to meet the onslaught, trying to seek friction both inside and out.

"Are you my prince?"

It took a moment for the question to filter through to him. Staring up into Ryanac's face, love and annoyance warred inside Markis. Irritation won out. Ryanac seemed to like playing this game. What was it with Ryanac calling him "my prince" when they fucked? "Is that what this is? An entertainment for you?"

A hand almost as large as his face gripped him in a pincer about his jaw. "You know it's not." The words growled out, threatening, and yet filled with an underlying anger blended with too much pain. Markis would have winced if his body hadn't been busy with other things. Fingers cupped and stroked his balls. His eyes nearly rolled up into his head. He couldn't stop tilting his head back and completely exposing his throat.

"You like that? You want these stroked?"

The grip tightened a little, creating just a touch of pain. Markis had forgotten all about the pain. The fast-moving member inside him had stopped hurting quite a while ago. His balls squirmed, enclosed in that tight grip. All Ryanac needed to do was make a fist and he could quite possibly crush his testicles. The idea that his manhood quite literally hung in his friend's hands brought forth a spike of fear. It also elicited a thrill that had nothing to do with fright. Behind all this, Markis became aware of a growing weight pressing in on him. Only the good sensations made it possible to contain it.

“Are you my prince?” There was something else in Ryanac’s voice now, some gruffness as if the man tried to control an underlying tremor, or emotions too strong to bear. Some kind of barrier broke apart inside *his prince* just then. Markis felt awash with love and lust, as well as the desire to give everything he was to this man. He moved his head just enough so that their foreheads touched.

“You know I am,” he whispered back.

Briefly, the world grew still. Even Ryanac’s cock lay unmoving within him, trembling only with want, with need. As Ryanac drew in a deep breath, an echo of that need seemed to shiver through him. “You’re mine,” he growled again, but Markis couldn’t be sure if it were a question or Ryanac simply confirming it. Markis opened his mouth to say something heartfelt and never got the chance. Ryanac started thrusting again and Markis tugged on the cuffs in sheer frustration.

“I want to touch you,” he complained, though it took a moment for him to get the words out.

“Afterwards,” Ryanac instructed. “After you ask me to fuck you.”

Markis’s eyes went wide. He wanted to argue. On the other hand, he wanted to do just that, although the pace was short and fast now. Begging for it seemed redundant, yet...

“Are you my prince?”

“Yessss.” Markis hissed the word out.

“And I’m your guard.”

“Yes.”

“I’m your captain.”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll never let another guard fuck you.”

It wasn’t a question. Ryanac demanded. Markis blinked up at his friend. The swift pounding made him dizzy. He was certain he would climax from the fucking alone if Ryanac didn’t stop, and it didn’t look as if the man was in the mood to stop or even slow things down.

Ryanac gave him a little shake. “I’m the only guard you’ll ever let fuck you.”

This time, Markis managed to nod, but that wasn’t good enough. A large hand closed about his throat, turned his head to meet the other man’s gaze. He couldn’t see much, but they were eye-to-eye, nose-to-nose, breath-to-breath. “You’ll never let another guard fuck you.”

“Never.”

“Never what?”

He had to swallow first but Markis meant it when he said it. “I’ll never let another guard fuck me.”

"Never let another guard inside you."

He shook his head. "No."

"You're my prince and I'm your guard."

"I'm yours. You are mine."

They rocked and rolled. The pallet creaked. The metal cuffs chinked together. Soft sibilant gasps filled the intimate space between them, not that much space existed. They lay together linked, body sealed to body, skin stuck to skin, separating with a soft sucking sound. A longer, drawn out growl rumbled up from Ryanac's throat. There came a soft clink, and it took a moment for Markis to realise one of his hands was free. At once, he brought it down to slide up Ryanac's side and cupped his back, gathering the larger man against him. He tilted his hips, forcing his body to open, to thrust up to meet those deep plunges. His cock caught, brushed against the small circle of Ryanac's navel. The movement caused that sweet pre-dew to moisten his inflamed and exposed cock just in the right way. Markis jerked, unintentionally fucking that small hole with the slit of his cock. Moisture gathered and sucked.

Markis gasped. Before, only heat existed. Now, something interrupted this. The sensation was so cold that it might stop his heart. Heat returned swiftly but he could not pretend it hadn't happened. Ryanac had felt it too. He reared back a little and stared down into Markis's face. Markis watched Ryanac's eyes widen and understood why. To his consternation, Markis could see him clearly. The light came from no available source, but it surrounded them as something intangible, almost as vaporous as mist. His face tightened and it wasn't due to the cock buried inside him.

"Don't do this to me," Markis whispered and his plea had nothing to do with sex. From the look on his face, Ryanac knew he wasn't talking to him. This, Markis dealt with on a day-to-day basis. This was the power that Ryanac would gladly have removed from Markis's life if he could. Yet even Ryanac said he wondered if it would change Markis in some fundamental way, make him less.

"Markis."

The prince started, surprised by how much love laced the man's voice. A small smile touched his lips despite the comet. His eyes searched blindly. "We should have thought of a safe word," Markis murmured.

"Are you going to be all right? I don't want to stop. I will if I have to."

"Don't stop. Don't stop moving inside me. Oh!" Markis's eyes closed, and he turned his head a little to the side as Ryanac plunged his entire length. "I don't want you to stop," Markis groaned out, his hands tugging. "But if I say danger, you have to listen."

Ryanac nodded where Markis could feel it against him, their faces touching. Markis tried to lose himself in the moment but he couldn't hide the struggle he currently underwent. Not all of his movements had to do with pleasure. Ryanac had asked Markis to



describe the feeling once. Markis told him his blood turned to dust, frozen into tiny solid particles by the ice. Beneath this, something dirty gathered. As it rolled through him, it gathered in size and momentum. The crystals in his blood grew in density and dimension. If he didn't take control of it, it would expand until it broke the confines of his body. Here, it became pleasant or something hateful. If the power obeyed, it flowed like semen from a spent cock. He could turn it, direct it, as easily as one turned a head. This power could do many things, some of which he might never learn. In many ways, it could be a gift, act like a friend as Ryanac advised. Sometimes, the comet had what he could only describe as a mood swing. It reacted too violently to his feelings, to emotions he carried but might not even be aware of until the comet touched them. The comet seemed to like the feel of his emotions in turmoil. Controlling the comet seemed to be a question of directing the power to the most important emotion. Right now, Markis should be lost in lust, if not love.

He lost these thoughts as his internal muscles gripped hard. He was tight, something Ryanac said he longed to correct and yet relished. Markis couldn't tell Ryanac the clenching pulsations were unintentional but, from the look on the man's face, they threatened to overwhelm him. Ryanac's expression also worried Markis. If Markis lost control of the comet now and yelled danger, it didn't look as though Ryanac would be able to respond quickly enough, if at all. They had proved the other day just how devastating the power could be. The safest place was at Markis's side and that could be painful enough.

Markis hovered for one motionless moment. Then his head tipped back, his mouth fell open, and his free hand gripped Ryanac's hip. Even as Ryanac plunged, Markis tilted his seat upwards, opening himself to the moment, begging in silence. Ryanac used a hand to guide him. They moved together as if they had always done this, perfectly in tune, parry and thrust. Ryanac looped one of Markis's legs fully over a shoulder, drawing a grunt from the prince's lips. The sound was not one of complaint, though. Royalty quivered as much as anyone when raw with desire. Ryanac grinned, and it was good to see the grin split his face. Then the big man pulled his face into some semblance of peace only so he could growl and grunt into Markis's mouth.

Tongues danced, flesh quivered, muscles shook from the strain, and drops of sweat turned their skin and other things slick. Ryanac ground his point home and orgasm rushed up to overtake them both. Markis couldn't say how he knew, but he was aware that Ryanac was just as unprepared for it. Markis grabbed at him, raked him with his nails. That took Ryanac over.

Ryanac came, sending thick ropes of seed into *his prince*. Even as he did, the big man was mindful enough to fasten a hand around Markis's cock. A hot flood coated their already overheated flesh and still Markis wouldn't, *couldn't* stop. His opening tightened, tugged, released only to clench once more. The rest of his body writhed. A sound like a scream strangled in his throat. Markis jerked and thrashed; he no longer controlled his body. Ryanac stared at him and Markis recognised the look. The man found the sight of all this incredibly arousing.

Gradually, their breathing calmed. As his senses cleared, Markis began to wonder which one of them would move first. Surely, Ryanac's conscience should instruct him to roll off, but all Markis could make out in the other man's body was utter contentment. He wasn't sure what he could read in the man's face. He still held some of the power. The comet could manifest as light both internal and external. Right now, just enough light existed for Markis to see his friend's face. Finally, unable to withstand Ryanac's full weight another minute, Markis simply had to ease him off. He kept his legs tight around Ryanac's hips, holding him in place, though.

"What's wrong? Talk to me."

The man hesitated. Markis prepared to tighten his hold; in truth, he would have struggled to cling to Ryanac if the man wanted to back off.

"Just say it, Ryanac." Markis reached up and cupped his face with his free hand. "As you keep reminding me, I'm your prince. You are my guard. Let there be no secrets, nothing unspoken that can fester as regret."

Still the big man seemed reluctant. If Markis ordered him to reply, Ryanac would do so, but he would not take it kindly. Still, Markis would give the order if he had to and Ryanac, staring into his eyes, apparently saw that. His expression took on a familiar resignation. Markis would order him, and Ryanac would have to refuse, or he could be more than a man and speak his mind. In some things, they knew each other too well.

The large man traced Markis's lips with his thumb. "As Uly is Samir to you, you are Samir to me." Something caught in Ryanac's voice, almost as if something broke inside him as he said it.

A slight frown touched Markis's face. "You think I don't know that?"

Ryanac blinked, almost jerked in surprise. He started to frown. His gaze flickered back and forth, taking in Markis's eyes. He opened his mouth as though to speak, but then hesitated. Markis noted the concern at the same time he became aware something was wrong other than their feelings. Even allowing for the comet, they could see each other too clearly.

"Ryanac." Amazing how his voice could sound so calm.

"What?"

"The tent's on fire." Surprise, calmness, and even a little amusement accompanied his pronouncement. Ryanac tore his gaze from his face, and looked up and to the side. Markis glanced over as well. Small, orange, smouldering flames suddenly sparked upwards into a straight line at the side of the tent. The fire provided the light. Ryanac cursed, sat up, and deftly unclipped Markis's wrist from the remaining cuff even as he gathered up his clothes. As he and Markis scrambled into their clothes and shouts arose outside, Markis had time to wonder whether Ryanac saw the fire as a curse or a blessing. It saved him for now, but they would talk again another night. Neither of them doubted where the fire came from. Some stray spark of Markis's power set the tent ablaze and the prince would not forgive himself that so easily. Neither would he forget they needed to talk. Some people believed you

shouldn't refer to anything spoken during sex. The Swithin were not such a race. From the look on Ryanac's face, Markis had to wonder, for the first and only time in his life, whether Ryanac felt the pain of being Swithin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Neither he nor Ryanac was so foolish to remain in the tent so long that the fire might get out of control with them in it. The canvas they used for tents was specially treated and it might not have even caught fire if the flames were entirely natural. Still, oddly, they paused long enough to make their appearance presentable even though that was not the Swithin way. No doubt some had heard the commotion going on between them, but they were Swithin and no one would think anything of it. Ryanac suppressing Markis's cries was merely part of the game, although Markis was no longer certain how much of it was merely a state of play.

Guards scooped up and threw sand over the fire, for although they carried plenty of water, it was by its very nature too precious to waste. The flames died down, leaving a gaping, dark-edged hole. Markis caught Ryanac's eye. They had both managed to dress sufficiently not to lift too many eyebrows even if they were among their own kind.

Markis opened his mouth and Ryanac turned away abruptly. The action was undeniably unintentional on Ryanac's part, but the direction they faced drew their gazes to the larger tent and the small figure that stood at its entrance. Her pale skin shone out against the tan fabric of the tent. Her dark hair stood out in an even more obvious contrast; one might have mistaken it for a shadow if her body were not so obvious. Whipping back the tent flap, Tressa disappeared within. The princess clearly had no doubts as to what her husband found so preoccupying that he lost control and set fire to a tent. They could have burned alive.

"It was an accident," Ryanac snapped, as though reading his mind. Markis flinched. He always found the guard's penchant for knowing what he was thinking rather disconcerting.

"That's not the only thing on my mind."

"I don't doubt it." Ryanac ran a hand through the strands of hair close to his scalp. The braid looked a little disarrayed, but the weight of it still held his hair down. "I have things to do and I should see if Uly has returned. I'll send him to you."

"No." Markis almost sighed. "Make sure he has eaten and let him get some sleep. You too." In truth, he wanted to talk, but he doubted Ryanac would be in the mood for it and decided to be kind. All he got for his troubles was a glare. Frowning, Markis watched Ryanac march away. Ryanac left him standing there, his mouth agape. Nothing had gone this day as Markis planned. Aside from the fantastic sex he'd just had, the day proved to be a total disaster. He'd intended to start this new era in his life between Uly's lips. Instead, he had hardly set eyes on the young man, he had argued with his wife, and he'd had passionate sex

with his guard and still managed to piss the man off. This wasn't how it should be between them. Why was everyone acting so bloody strange?

## Chapter Five

“Exactly where did you send Uly this morning?” Markis accosted Ryanac the only place he could, in the midst of the procession where Ryanac could not so readily turn his back on him. He might be his personal guard and yet, somehow, Ryanac had managed to keep just enough distance between them to leave them with no chance to talk.

“I sent him off to see Antal and to take him a bottle of brandy in place of your apology.”

Markis almost winced. Yes, he had meant to do that and to take Tressa with him. “I’d have seen to that tonight.”

Ryanac cast him a glance that said he didn’t believe it. Markis gritted his teeth. Usually, he fell into playing Ryanac’s games despite making personal promises that he wouldn’t. The more Markis told Ryanac that he knew what he was up to, and the more he protested, the more his friend seemed able to draw him into it. Not this time.

“We’ve been riding for two hours. Why isn’t Uly back?”

“He asked if he could spend the day with Antal and I said yes.”

Markis gaped. His horse, no doubt sensing his mood, faltered in its step. He guided the animal on straight and could only hope it didn’t look strange. If any of the men thought him unable to control his mount, they would smirk behind his back, though there would be no malice in it. If they knew he and Ryanac were fighting...

The thought gave him pause. He and Ryanac were fighting.

“You told him yes.” Markis repeated the words, his tone heavy in disbelief. Ryanac’s gaze flicked towards him yet again but this time, the eyes contained a cold glitter and the face looked hard and set.

“He asked. I answered.”

"Meaning?" He didn't have to enquire; he could hear very well what his guard implied.

"Meaning Uly asked to be away from you. Meaning he asked me, not you."

Markis opened his mouth to argue, but nothing emerged. Ryanac watched while the true force of his words took up residence. Markis wanted to argue, but he couldn't. Uly wanted to be away from him. Uly asked Ryanac for permission, not Shavar, not the Comet. Markis tried to hold Ryanac's gaze and failed. He could still see Ryanac's unrelenting gaze from the corner of his eye. The guard pulled a face and sighed.

"He wanted to be away from the bad feeling between you and Tressa. She's the perfect wife for you. It shouldn't be like this."

How could he argue with that? "No, it shouldn't. It won't always be this way. We'll be fine."

Ryanac made a slight clucking noise with his tongue and it didn't appear to be for the horse. "Making an Azulite woman frustrated is never a good idea."

"You think I should have handled things differently?" He had explained Tressa's mistake of the previous day.

"No." A soft chuckle came with the word. "I do think you should have foregone breakfast and fucked her stupid while the rest of us were breaking camp. You should have shown her what she could have had last night."

"Ah, but I'd already let her know I had no intention of being with her last night."

Ryanac stared ahead, his body moving with the easy rhythm of the horse. "You wanted to be with Uly." It sounded like an accusation.

"I have the right."

"Of course you do. Still, she wouldn't have known if you hadn't told her."

"You knew."

"I'm not a young woman who has just had to leave her entire life behind."

"I'm giving her a new one."

Ryanac nodded. "A good one. Still, she needs time to adjust. Right now, she's probably feeling lonesome."

To Markis's horror, he found it disturbing that right now he didn't much care. "This isn't about Tressa. It's about you and me. You're the one who resents I wanted to be with Uly."

Ryanac shook his head. "That's not what I resent."

"Then, by the comet, what *do* you resent? What is eating at you, Ryanac? We're Swithin. Jealousy does not become us."

"I am *not* jealous."

If that were true, Ryanac wouldn't sound so angry about the suggestion. "Then explain it to me." Markis hated the fact that he struggled to keep his voice low. He wanted to shout,

rant, and rage, and he wasn't certain how the comet would react to that. He hadn't done that for years and now, of all people, to think it should be Ryanac that drove him to it...

Markis took a deep breath and closed his eyes for just a moment. When he opened them again, Ryanac was looking at him.

"I told you last night," the big man said.

"I know. I told you I understand." Uly was now Uly Samir. The title did not translate well from their ancient language to the new. It meant someone that stood by your side for entertainment, though that made the term sound callous and impersonal when the opposite was true. The designation referred to a person who was a companion for life, who meant as much to you as your own life did. It meant a deep and pure love. Markis knew that he meant as much to Ryanac, though for some reason, they never quite crossed that last divide that would make them Samir to each other. The distinction between what he felt for Ryanac and what he felt for Uly was subtle, but it existed, and Ryanac knew it. To tell him differently, to pretend otherwise, would have been an insult.

Ryanac shook his head. "That's not what you said and I'm not sure it's true."

Frustration won out over the rage. Markis hated that his voice emerged sounding plaintive. "I don't know what I can do other than to tell you I love you, and you are the one who has always said I had no need to do that."

It became Ryanac's turn to look frustrated. "I know. Maybe I'm not being fair. I'm not even sure I understand it myself. I have complete faith in what we have, what we share."

"Yet you send Uly off..."

"I sent him off last night, not this morning. This morning was his idea. Have you considered that with his broken background the last thing he needs is all of us bickering?"

"I wasn't aware we were *bickering*." Markis put more than sufficient sarcasm behind the word.

"One doesn't always have to shout to bicker. No doubt he fears this new *security*" -- Ryanac laced the word with equal sarcasm -- "as much as Tressa does. Last evening you argued with Tressa, you fucked with me, and then sat alone brooding. This morning, he was looking for somewhere to be, so I provided the escape."

"Either way, you could have stopped it. Instead, you send him off to...to Antal, a man nearer his own age. A young man who..." He stopped, unable to complete the sentence.

Ryanac regarded him. Markis could feel that relentless gaze burning into the side of his face, but he refused to turn his head towards it.

"I sent him off to a young man Uly could easily like. Do you honestly think Antal will ravish Shavar's Samir?"

"He might." The words tore out of him but were no less true for that. The Swithin lived by certain rules and being royalty did not make one an exception.

"I've explained to Uly that to take another lover he would have to seek your permission first."

The Swithin way dictated that sex was freely given and shared among people of either sex. One graciously received a polite refusal. Marriages were monogamous or open, but couples discussed this prior to taking vows. Swithin pairings often comprised three people, depending if the man or woman had a liking for someone of their own sex as well. It could be difficult to explain to outsiders and Tressa made his jaw ache with trying. She still didn't seem to grasp the concept, though in many ways the freedom of it held a great attraction for her. It seemed she wanted him to have no other women, and he assured her that would not be a problem; he was fine with that. He couldn't be sure she believed him. As for other men, he had two on his hands. In the months to come, he planned to have two *in* his hands and, possibly, at the same time, so what more could he want? He might be Shavar, but even he was only one man. He might long to make up for lost time, but even he could only take so much sex. Ryanac, on the other hand, seemed capable of much more than an average man. Part of Markis was envious, but as long as things didn't deteriorate, he was looking to other ways to help keep Tressa happy. Azulite women were highly sexed and if Tressa decided she wanted or needed another lover, he might consider it. If Uly should ask that same question, he wasn't sure he could consent. If either of them had been Swithin, they would have accepted his decision with good grace. Markis began to see why Tressa believed their way of life boded ill. It was one thing to grow up with such beliefs, but to welcome them when you had known another way of life could make your heart ache.

As for heartache...

"Uly loves you." Ryanac told him. "Something is making him hold back from admitting that, but he does love you."

Markis frowned. Ryanac's words stunned him even though he knew it to be true. He just hadn't realised anyone else noticed.

"He won't do anything without asking you and neither will Antal. Even so, it shouldn't bother you, but it does. What's wrong, Markis? We're Swithin. Jealousy does not become us."

He closed his eyes, irritated that Ryanac should send his own words back to him. What else could he expect, though? He even deserved it. He should refute the accusation but he couldn't even speak.

"I didn't send him away to fall in love with someone else. A little company will do him good. I sent him to Antal because I thought if they get on together, they might make good sparring partners. I can be a little too rough, and I'm too big for some of the moves I want to teach him. At least, I'm too big while he's learning."

A small smile touched Markis's lips despite his irritation.

"And I sent him off so we could share some time together." Ryanac eyed him intently. "Do you realise that all I've had with you is a week when we were young men before we left for separate academies? I had to give you up then. Then you called for me and I was happy to



stand at your side. I could even accept the fact that we might never touch again, but then..." A grin infused Ryanac's face. Markis almost groaned. The man really couldn't help himself. "Then the opportunity *arose* to make love to you again, and break that idiotic celibacy." He gave that one word specific emphasis, then his face calmed, looked contemplative, no longer exactly anguished, but maybe a little sad. "I had that moment and I had to let you go to Uly."

Markis frowned. "You didn't seem to mind."

"I didn't. I even encouraged it, but I can't pretend I didn't...feel the pain of it. And now, you have Tressa."

"Something else you encouraged."

Ryanac smirked. "Believe me, if I hadn't approved there was no way in the world I would have let you wed."

Markis opened his mouth to argue. He was Shavar. He was a prince. Duty dictated he wed. He remained silent on the subject. If Ryanac said he wouldn't have let him marry, Markis believed him. "So, it's not Uly and it's not Tressa, so what is wrong, then?"

Ryanac sighed. It didn't look as if the big man would answer, and then he spoke. "We all love you."

Markis looked up in surprise. Ryanac smiled at the look on his face.

"We all want a piece of you and right now it's a very big piece. Uly needs you. There's so much physically and emotionally you've yet to explore together, but the same applies in many ways to Tressa. Although" -- Ryanac tilted his head to one side as though considering -- "I get the feeling physical rather than emotional will more than satisfy her. And I" -- his eyes took on a dreamy look, gazing towards the sky -- "I want what Uly wants. I want time with you. I want to take us to some out of the way place and kill this itch in excess but your duty isn't going to allow that."

The man turned his head to look at him directly, and even drew his mount a little closer. If any of the men surrounding them took any notice, they probably thought they were discussing politics and military requirements as they often did. If they knew the truth, they would have smiled knowingly. The Swithin admired matters of love and sex and did little to hide it. Strange then, that Markis especially liked the quiet intimacy that seemed to have sprung up between them. Ryanac's voice dropped in volume, shivered over his skin as if it were a caress.

"The truth is, I want to fuck you every which way into next week. Sometimes, it even feels as though I would like to crawl under your skin, and I have to confess I don't always like it. That way lies obsession and it is dangerous and not the Swithin way of doing things. At the same time, I recognise it for what it truly is. Too many wasted years. Too much time standing at your side, not being able to touch you, accepting it, living with it, believing things between us could never be this way again. Now that I have you, I can't get enough. Making you beg isn't enough. Even last night the comet took you away from me. That isn't

fair. I've hated what it put you through, but for the first time I truly resented it. I felt bad for me, and for Uly."

That dark gaze bore into his and the voice dropped to just above a whisper. "We need you, Markis. It's not fair of me to tell you, but we need you so much it threatens the harmony we could share. It threatens our peace."

Markis studied the other man's face. He wanted to say something, offer some kind of comfort. He couldn't, unless... "Send word down the line to Antal. Tell him to keep Uly with him tonight. Use sparring as an excuse. Besides, knowing Antal, he will test Uly's strengths and weaknesses and put the time to good use. I want a small private tent tonight."

Ryanac raised one eyebrow. No doubt he thought of how Uly would take the news and how Tressa would have a tantrum.

"Send Uly and Tressa word that I have a lesson." That would certainly stop them from asking questions. It might even elicit a little sympathy, though he winced at the thought of duping them. He told a half-truth and that would have to do. Ryanac still regarded him. "I want you to share the tent with me tonight. Eat light and early, and clear your duties or give them to someone else. I want to retire as soon as the camp is set and later... Later I want to show you something."

The smirk didn't go unnoticed, but Ryanac quickly straightened his face. The big man knew the reference wasn't sexual and for once, Markis could see Ryanac was intrigued. It would be another nine hours with only one break before they set up camp. It would be interesting to see how many hours passed before Ryanac asked him questions. Markis was determined to keep the guard guessing, partly because he really couldn't explain, and partly because it was just so much fun to have the upper hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

Soft light filled the tent. Although the sun had not yet set, inside the tent the hour felt late. Furnishings were sparse, but the tent contained a pallet just large enough for two, a single chair, and a small table made up of a board set across packing crates. They were on the move, and several other packing cases containing necessary supplies were set up inside. Still, the regiment provided the prince with as much comfort as he would allow. The main tent possessed more comfort in it, of course, and room enough for the four of them, but currently Tressa occupied the tent alone, apart from her maid who was spending the evening with her. Strangely, Idelle, the old maid, seemed to want to protect Tressa's virtue. Considering the young princess had spent a goodly number of years in a chastity belt, Ryanac had said that perhaps the maid was more sensible than he first thought. Although Ryanac took her ways as prudish, perhaps she sought to protect Tressa from her reckless self.

Markis glanced up as Ryanac stepped into the tent. His gaze then lowered back to the book in his lap. Markis sat with his legs outstretched, feet crossed at the ankles on a crate. He noticed Ryanac's surprise that he wore a night sidon, the male nightshift. Although Ryanac

preferred to sleep naked and knew that Markis did too, there was something enticing about starting out dressed in fine linen. The garment was especially soft and to run your hands over someone so dressed...

"Are you all right?" Markis asked, killing the thought. Ryanac blinked and looked to his face. A grin slowly infused the guard's features.

"Retiring early?" He made the question suggestive.

"Something like that." Markis glanced once more at the book. He saw Ryanac's gaze follow his and looked back up. The man saw the book and probably itched to ask, but Ryanac wouldn't do that. No more than he would ask why Markis arranged for them to be alone this night. Markis wasn't ready to enlighten him. "How did Tressa take the news?"

"Actually, you are spared," Ryanac said. He sounded amused, but then, he usually did. "Tressa chooses to spend this night alone in her tent with her maid." Ryanac glanced around and Markis resisted the urge to smirk. There was nowhere for the guard to sit but on the bed, so he stood. "She began to bleed earlier. Something I practically needed to wring from that maid of hers. She didn't want to let me in to talk to Tressa at all."

Markis raised an eye. Ryanac sniggered.

"It seems that what we Swithin take for granted, the Azulites really do treat in the most absurd fashion. At such a time, women are *discouraged* from even talking to a man."

Markis frowned. "You mean..."

"Yes. For three weeks of the month, our little princess will be happy to be ravished. For one week, she wants to lock herself behind closed doors."

"We're travelling." The pure senselessness of all this darkened Markis's voice.

"I know. At such times it is *acceptable* that the woman in question cover her face." Ryanac's lips switched in such a way he clearly struggled not to burst into laughter. "Of course, this is probably all to do with the men not wishing to become involved in such...messy circumstances as pregnancy and childbirth. They have trained their women to suit their own wishes." The smile slipped. "Tressa also suffers discomfort. Something else I wrung out of them. They wouldn't have told me at all if I hadn't seen how pale she looks."

"That's not necessary."

Ryanac nodded, paced a little, arms folded. "I tried to tell her that. She won't listen. She said that if it hurts it is because it is supposed to." He laughed a little at the questioning look on Markis's face. "Apparently, this is a woman's punishment for being so sinfully enticing to a man."

Neither of them needed to say a word. Their expressions said it all. How could the Azulite have become such a powerful nation considering they based the foundations of their society on such ignorance?

"I had the cook mix a little prairie greens into her food. She won't know what it is and it will help her with the fatigue until we get to the city. If we can talk sense into her, she won't have to suffer like this again."

Prairie greens grew wild and, though they tasted bland, they would keep you alive. The Swithin used them in dishes for a rich source of nutrients, but hid the flavour beneath other things. They would strengthen Tressa and ease the fatigue. Next month, they could make certain her diet suited her needs and she could see a dai'mean, one whose job was to soothe such ailments. The very least they could do was give her something to ease the pain. She did not have to suffer this much.

"I'll see she doesn't." Markis hardened his tone. His friend lifted his head and then nodded in understanding.

"I agree, but it's also my job to be the voice of reason and caution."

Markis sniggered. "So that's what you call it."

Ryanac ignored the comment as he stood there, arms across his chest. Markis had a good view of him from the side. There was a lot to see.

"Persuasion would be better than force." Markis looked to his face in question. Ryanac just returned the gaze. "I know you. Rather than see her suffer, you'll slip something into her food."

"And you just didn't?"

"I put food into her food. Comet knows what they've been feeding her. My mother would say her blood's too thin."

That brought a smile to Markis's lips. He nodded, and once more looked down at the book in his lap. His gaze flickered back to Ryanac and they stared at one another. When it looked as if they might remain frozen for hours, Ryanac made an impatient gesture.

"Take off your armour," Markis instructed. That was easy for the big man to do. He only wore a chest plate. "In fact, if we're going to do this, you may as well take off all your clothes."

Ryanac stopped with the leather vest half over his head, and then cursed when it caught. He struggled out of it and looked to Markis's face. The look was part serious and half-amused. "If we're to do what?" he snapped.

"That's what I have to tell you first, but I want you to join me on the bed."

The pallet was a poor substitute for a real bed, but the way Ryanac moved towards it, he clearly found no problem joining Markis there.

## Chapter Six

The big man sat cross-legged on the pallet looking completely at ease in his skin. His gaze followed Markis about the room. Finally, when Markis ran out of little things he *needed* to do, he approached the temporary bed. He brought the book with him, but set it aside. Markis went to his knees and the light from the lantern flashed on the silver-handled brush he held in his left hand.

"I thought it might be a nice idea if we let down each other's hair." Markis hated the slight hesitancy that entered his voice.

Ryanac stared at him intently. Markis couldn't help it. His eyes flickered left and right, unable to hold the gaze. Finally, he looked down, and then he blinked three times in quick succession at what he saw there. Aware Ryanac knew what caught his gaze, he looked up and received the full force of that grin. Heat sweeping over his skin told Markis that he blushed. The expression on Ryanac's face was instant surprise.

"I might expect a blush from Uly," the guard remarked.

They were Swithin. To be caught looking would normally result in mutual interest or shared laughter, never embarrassment. Markis couldn't help how he felt. He had always been a little coy around Ryanac, of all people, but perhaps his embarrassment was partly because he still wore the sidon while his guest sat naked. There was also the mention of their braids. They were travelling and there was no real reason to unfasten their hair. To take it down tonight would mean putting it back up in the morning. That Markis would even suggest it gave this evening significance, but he hadn't yet explained and Ryanac waited. To play with their hair, to groom one another, was an intimate act.

Ryanac inclined his head slightly. "First, remove that silly garment, and second, are you going to tell me what's going on anytime soon?"

Markis nodded. "I'll talk while we do this. If you agree, then there is something I want to try. If you don't wish to, well, then you can still stay." The smile sat light on his lips, but Markis felt the weight of it somewhere inside.

"Shall I do you first?" Ryanac could read from a supply list and make it sound suggestive. He could do much with a sentence like that.

Markis shook his head, ignoring the double meaning on purpose. "You've done my hair many times. When have I had the chance to groom you?"

"You weren't normally conscious." Ryanac referred to times when the lessons left Markis wrecked.

"Even so, I'll do your hair first," he said, "then I'll remove the garment."

It became Ryanac's turn to shake his head. "Take it off or I'll rip it."

Markis hesitated. Then he said, "No."

"Why?"

He glanced down to Ryanac's lap and back again. "Because like you, I'm as hard and unbending as your blade and I need to concentrate on other things first."

"I could take care of that."

Markis almost sighed. He had given Ryanac cause to think of his rigid cock beneath all the fine linen cloth. Even trying not to look, he saw Ryanac's cock twitch in response. He schooled his face into a sober expression.

"Arousal is good. I don't need to tell you it helps me to control the comet and that's what we have to talk about tonight."

A growl rumbled in the other man's throat, voicing his frustration, but he nodded. They could stay here all night arguing, or he could let Markis have his way. Clearly, Ryanac chose the swifter option. Despite the man's apparent annoyance, Markis believed Ryanac looked forward to their playing with one another's hair, yet the surprise that registered on Ryanac's face was no shock to Markis as he first reached for the book. He opened it at a certain page and then placed it in Ryanac's hands.

"Read this while I take down your hair."

Despite the order, still Ryanac waited until Markis's fingers set to work on the end of his braid. He removed the clip most Swithin used and slowly but surely worked through the weave of the hair. When Markis finally reached for the brush, Ryanac at last looked to the page.

Ryanac stared intently for a few moments and then made an odd movement of his head. Markis struggled not to smirk. The attention he gave Ryanac's hair clearly distracted the big man. The soft drape of the sidon stroked along the big man's flanks where Markis knelt separating skeins of hair. As he worked through them, he passed the brushed-out sections over Ryanac's shoulder so they hung down one side of his face. Markis awaited the moment when he witnessed tension leave the man's shoulders. The slow rhythmic pull of

the brush often coaxed forth a sense of peace, and peace was something they seldom shared. The man was so still that Markis glanced to his face. Ryanac's eyes were closed. Before Markis could speak, Ryanac opened his eyes with a small jolt as though he remembered he should be reading. Markis gave himself over to the quiet atmosphere, but watched Ryanac as the man's eyes skimmed the words on the page. Ryanac flipped the cover, keeping his place with fingers set between the pages, and examined the exterior of the book. The skin was leather, hand-stitched, with finely embossed lettering on the surface. In appearance, it looked dull, black, and brown.

"Where did you get this?"

"From Stargazer." Although Markis answered readily enough, his tone emerged guarded. Stargazer was one of the seers and true stargazers among Markis's advisors. His erroneous beliefs had caused years of torment and celibacy for Markis, something for which he doubted Ryanac would ever forgive the old man, yet it wasn't all Stargazer's fault. Their race had done these things the same way for centuries. More than time enough for things to change. Stargazer's name came from the old tongue and his parents chose one so ancient even the Swithin had problems pronouncing it. The nickname of Stargazer stuck and now, not many even remembered his true given name.

"How?"

The brush stopped moving. "Uly," Markis admitted.

Ryanac tilted his head to look back. The movement caused his hair to hang in a drape in Markis's arms. Markis swallowed, trying to ignore the sensuality of it. A slight shiver ran through him nonetheless, but he kept the conversation on track. "If Uly can steal a key, why not a book?"

"If Stargazer had caught him..."

There was little need to finish the sentence. Once, the council would have wanted to execute Uly for such a theft. What sickened Markis was the idea that Stargazer would enjoy bringing such a situation to light. The seer didn't like the idea that Markis defied him. He didn't like Uly and there, sure as the comet, was no love lost between the old man and Ryanac. "What are you thinking?" Markis asked.

"That it pains all of my sensibilities that Shavar could ask Stargazer for a book, only to have the old man refuse. That I approve of you taking it, yet it concerns me. That when he notices the book's missing..."

"He can guess. He daren't accuse, not openly anyway." They both knew Stargazer could cause them trouble.

"Fair enough. Why did you not tell me about this, though? Uly had to steal this book before he stole the key." Uly had stolen a key from a man at the gathering between the Azulites and Swithin. They had needed the key to get Tressa out of the chastity belt without hurting her.

"I'm sorry we didn't mention it. He did it the morning before we left for the Azu plains." The night prior to that, Markis and Uly had made love for the first time. That night Markis had asked Uly if he would steal something if he asked. At the time, Markis meant the key, but he had the book in mind also. He hadn't mentioned the book until the morning, and he asked Uly not to mention it to anyone, including Ryanac. He had wanted to see what its pages contained first. He quickly explained this to the guard.

"It pains you that you needed to ask him to do this," the big man remarked. Markis could say nothing. He just nodded.

Markis moved around in front. From here, the combing of Ryanac's hair would take on an almost ritualistic motion. By the time Markis finished, the black and silver hair would hang in three groups -- one down the man's back and two smaller drapes, one each side of his face. Even as he started positioning the guard's hair, Ryanac tugged out the clip holding Markis's braid. "Off," he said, and he wasn't referring to the clip in his hand. Markis did nothing to stop him when Ryanac set the book aside and slipped his hands up Markis's hips, pushing the sidon up his body as he did. Drawing it over his head and tossing it aside, Markis went back to separating the last strands of hair as Ryanac began separating the weave of the prince's chestnut mane.

"Do you understand the book?" Markis asked.

The question caused the guard to hesitate. "Yes, and no," he finally admitted.

"There." Markis finished with the hair and sat back, though his fingers lingered amidst the strands on the left side.

Ryanac took possession of the brush and used it. Markis met his gaze. For a few moments, the only sounds to permeate the silence were of life taking place outside of the tent. Ryanac had separated and brushed out most of Markis's hair by the time Markis moved. He rose up a little so that they broke contact and then Ryanac blinked as the prince stood. It wasn't Markis's intent to put his erection in the other man's face, and the way Ryanac kept his face slightly turned said the guard knew it. Still, Ryanac need only to look up to see it hovering close by.

As Markis kicked at his legs, Ryanac opened them. Markis sat back down between them, one leg under, one over Ryanac's, and around his hips. They sat face-to-face, almost groin-to-groin. From here, Ryanac could finish separating Markis's hair by reaching around him. He drew the first section down the left side. After completing the back, he would finish by pulling down the right section of hair.

The way the man's jaw tightened said that he itched with questions. Markis remained silent, savouring the moment. Heat rose between them and in the midst of that, their individual aromas. Ryanac had told Markis he possessed a slightly bittersweet scent. Ryanac smelt of warmth and musk. They had told Uly, when he asked, that he smelt of spring grass. To some extent, at present, they all smelt of horse, but couldn't help it on a long journey, and the fact that they all carried the scent largely cancelled it out. Beneath this, Markis could



smell the pure scent of male skin and the musk of arousal. No doubt unable to control himself, the next time Ryanac had to press close to catch a section of hair, he tilted his head and captured Markis's lips.

One did not usually kiss while grooming each other, but then one could not accuse Ryanac of taking notice of protocol. Markis tensed slightly, and then gave in to the kiss. When they drew back, both men were a little breathless. Ryanac glanced at the brush as if he wanted to throw it to the other side of the tent, but not to complete the grooming would be an insult, and he would not do that. His hand was a little unsteady, but he tugged it through Markis's hair, making the prince flinch only once and immediately apologising for it.

"Do you think you can do what the book says?" The strangled way Ryanac spoke hinted that he needed the distraction of speech. Markis was grateful for it, aware of the growing heat at their groins.

"Do you understand it?"

"Not completely."

"I...took the book for other reasons." Markis's slight pause made Ryanac smile. Take was one word for it. "It has much to offer me and much of it I never expected to find. I suspect much of its contents are never shared with those who attain the role of Shavar even if he gets to be king."

"How can the council hide things from the king?"

"That's what I don't like any more than you, my friend. Safiyah," Markis added, catching his slip and using the Swithin word. "I do not like anyone having so much power." The prince sighed. "Not even me, but there's not much I can do about that." He meant the comet, of course. "I still believe, though, that no one should rule above the king, but that the king should be answerable for his actions." Markis made no bones about the fact that his and his father's views often differed.

"You don't have to do that," Ryanac interrupted.

"Do what?"

"Call me safiyah." Ryanac readily called Markis his best friend, but the prince seldom used such words.

"You are my best friend. At times you have been my only friend."

Ryanac shrugged and Markis stilled the man's hand, gripping the fingers around the brush. "Fine. Say whatever you feel," Ryanac said.

"You think I would say it if I didn't mean it?"

"I mean you can say it even if you don't. It's nice to hear."

Markis sat there studying him. He searched the other man's face until Ryanac clearly grew uncomfortable and looked away. It had been a long time since anyone managed to make the guard do that and Markis enjoyed the moment. He still gripped the hand

containing the brush. The way the muscles tensed, he expected Ryanac to jerk his hand loose, but he didn't.

"I love you," Markis said softly. "I would even go so far as to say why you are speaking this way, why you are asking, if I did not know how unsettled you are right now."

The other man's gaze narrowed, though he still didn't look to the prince's face. Ryanac's lips started to pull back into a familiar smirk. Markis's other hand reached up to touch his face.

"Don't do that. Don't make this a joke. I have always loved you. You know that. I wouldn't have survived this long without you."

"That's gratitude."

"No. I love what you've done for me, but you couldn't have done any of it if you weren't you. When I left for the academy, I kept track of you." Ryanac looked up, his eyes widening in what must be surprise. Markis finally let go of the hand holding the brush but he kept his fingers against Ryanac's face. Neither of them so much as glanced away. "I waited until you served your term so that I could transfer you without too many raised eyebrows."

Ryanac frowned. "But you waited another year."

A slow nod accompanied the removal of his hand from his friend's face. "When the time came, I decided I was being selfish. I didn't know what to do. I had no right to dictate to you."

"You're Shavar," Ryanac said, as if that explained everything. In their culture, it did, but Markis shook his head.

"I am your friend first. I didn't want to take you out of your life. I resolved to leave you be. When I could stand it no longer, only then did I come up with the idea of giving you a choice. I only wanted you with me if you wished to be. I could only hope you were still the person you had always been. I knew that man would say no if it wasn't what he wanted. Now, of course, I know how you feel and I want you to know how I feel, too."

Markis sighed, and after a moment of silence, Ryanac resumed the movements of the brush. He drew the final section of hair over Markis's right shoulder and began to smooth it out. The prince sat quietly, looking at the book. "Do you think you can do it?" Ryanac asked again.

For a moment, Markis didn't answer him, and then he said, "When we made love--"

Ryanac sniggered. "Was that what that was?"

Markis gave him a suffering look. "When we made love back at the castle, there was a moment when I said I could burn the skin from you. As unpleasant as that idea was, part of me also found it...seductive." Markis glanced down, then looked back up. Ryanac finished fiddling with his hair, but seemed reluctant to stop. He laid the brush aside, though.

"I hope you're going somewhere pleasant with that statement."

"I wanted to send a little of the power into you. I didn't understand that at the time. I could feel it, sense it. I knew it was doing things to you, to both of us, but I didn't trust my control and I didn't understand what the desire even meant. I didn't know the power could be shared in other ways except for malicious intent."

He waited while Ryanac connected the words with the page he had read. The large man's face tightened. "I wish I found it hard to believe that Stargazer would, or even could, keep such things from you, but I don't. How do we do this?"

"Ryanac, do you understand what this will mean if it works?" He needed to make sure the big man understood. "There'll be no secrets between us. We'll know each other completely. All the bad as well as the good. We'll relive parts of our lives we may not wish to and we'll know what the other felt."

"Will it help you?"

Markis made an impatient gesture. "This isn't about that." When Ryanac just sat there, he swallowed his irritation and pride in a way Ryanac had witnessed a thousand times. It felt eerie to know the man read his face. "It may help me to understand the comet, or even learn a little more understanding of control, but that isn't why I want to do this. Or it's not the only reason, at least." Markis smiled. "I want you to know me. I want you to know how I feel. You say there are moments when you want to crawl under my skin. This is exactly what I'm offering you. I have to warn you that we're talking about the comet. There's always a risk."

"You live with that risk every day. We all do, but you more than most."

Markis nodded. They would set the risk aside. "We'll be letting each other inside. Do you know what that means? I've never done this before. If the technique works, it's actually quite simple, but I don't know what to expect or know what we'll feel. I should think it will be--"

"Intense," Ryanac said, with a full-blown grin. Markis frowned and then poked him in the chest. Laughing, Ryanac caught his wrist and drew the hand to lie flat against his skin. "You can feel my heart beating. Know that it beats for you. There is nothing I would not share with you, so it is I who has to ask you if you truly want this with me. If you do, I would love it."

Markis nodded, and then leaned forward until their lips lightly touched, but he still managed to speak. "If I'm lying, you will know it soon enough."

\* \* \* \* \*

Markis referred to the page in the book one more time, then set it aside. He wiped his hands on his thighs because they felt a little damp. He looked down, but that gave him a fine view of Ryanac's groin, and the semi-sleeping creature lying next to his. He immediately raised his eyes only to meet his friend's twinkling gaze. He wanted to deny that Ryanac's

body was a distraction but it would be a lie, and soon, Ryanac would know everything he felt. He couldn't help but return the grin. Still, he shook his head. "Please. I have to concentrate."

"Pity we can't fuck and do this at the same time."

Markis hesitated. "Actually, we can, but I don't know enough of what I'm doing as yet to try. I think the two combined would be more than overwhelming, and there's no way I'm going to risk it just yet." Ryanac nodded as though he understood and even agreed. Then, just as Markis went to close his eyes, he leaned forward.

"Just so long as we do get to fuck sometime tonight?"

Markis almost choked. "Ryanac. Please!" He closed his eyes against Ryanac's laughing face and concentrated on slowing his heart. He didn't have to, but it felt right to begin this in a relatively calm frame of mind. A few minutes passed before he felt a strange flowing touch trailing up each arm. It took another moment for him to realise he could feel Ryanac's fingers.

"Ignore me," the guard whispered. "Call the comet. Stop stalling."

He almost jerked back. Ryanac was right. Once more, he *opened* up the part of him that called or contained the power. Markis had done this so many times now he couldn't count them. The power trickled in and began to weigh him down. This was how most of his lessons began. He had to fight the weight, the sense of compression, and the sensation was so horrid he could barely put it into words. He hated this part. If he could just own the comet or make it one with him, he would have all that he wanted. Markis often wondered why this power was part of him and yet he had to fight it so. The answer came to him too simply. Any man that wielded such power too easily was a man the world should destroy.

His concentration wavered and he wanted to tell Ryanac to stop stroking him; yet, even as he thought it, the power moved to where his thoughts led. One of the hands stopped wandering and slipped low. A heated grip cupped his balls, giving them a gentle squeeze, and then slid up the length of his now rigid cock. Markis opened his mouth and gasped, and a thumb slid between his parted lips, closely followed by a tongue. The twin invasion in his mouth sent a spike of desire through him that tightened his testicles, made his cock twitch, and caused him to gasp even in the midst of the kiss. His whole body jerked.

"Come on, Markis," Ryanac whispered against his lips. "Show this comet who's in control."

His eyes remained closed, but golden light lit up his vision. He opened his eyes then and stared into Ryanac's face. He saw him but he also saw *through* him, beyond him. His gaze flickered back and forth to Ryanac's face and then off into the distance. Ryanac's gentle tickling brought a long, drawn out sound of complaint through his lips. Those large fingers slipped lower and under. A fingertip circled, pressed, threatening to enter him. Then the hand moved back. The guard's hands played almost casually with his genitals and part of

Markis wanted to tell him to stop. Another part was too interested; the comet certainly was. He no longer looked through Ryanac but stared blindly at his chest.

“Markis,” Ryanac spoke softly. “You’re meant to be doing something.”

Yes, he was. Swallowing though it took effort, Markis set his hands against Ryanac’s shoulders and let the golden halo expand until it enveloped them. Then he contained the power within that circle as he had practiced. When he felt calm and was certain he had control, he dragged his gaze towards Ryanac’s eyes. The big man stopped playing with him...almost. His fingers travelled, but not in one place. They caressed, but didn’t assault. Ryanac took a deep breath.

“What does it feel like?”

“Strange,” his friend confessed. “Not like it did when you called it forth as a deterrent. There’s something calm and peaceful about this, though I can sense the potential for destruction. There was nothing calm or peaceful about it the other day.”

“I called up more than this and I don’t have full control yet. Without the three of you to ground me, I would have killed us all.” To deter the Azulite army from war, Markis had called the comet forth. They had hoped that having those he loved close to him, he would manage to maintain control. It worked, though there was more to it than that. Love and lust seemed to do strange things to the comet. Both caught its interest and, to some extent, made the power behave. Markis looked into Ryanac’s eyes and, with care, reached out to place his right hand over Ryanac’s heart. He watched for signs of uncertainty, but as he had instructed him, his friend reached out and did the same. If he did this wrong, he might stop their hearts. As foolish as that made this seem, it would help him more than he admitted. Markis was aware he could learn a lot about the comet this way, the feel of it, and why sometimes it felt as if it were a part of him, and then at others, like a separate being. He was also looking forward to sharing the experience. With no reason left to stall, Markis called a small part of the power, tightened it, and sent it flowing down his arm and into his friend.

Lights burst into the sky over the clearing even though Markis was aware only he and Ryanac could see them. What they couldn’t see was each other, and then they were somewhere else rushing towards each other, tethered on either end of a long, golden string.

## Chapter Seven

"Forget the sword," Antal said with a wry grin. "If Ryanac is teaching you, then I know you are good, or that you at least have potential."

Uly pulled a face. "That's not why he's teaching me. Don't forget I'm with the prince."

Antal gave that shrug of his, the one where he lifted his shoulders, tilted his head to the side, and closed his eyes. His eyes opened again as his shoulders lowered. Uly found the mannerism amusing, but in a good way. "Ryanac said I would like you," he said, and then gaped, horrified he said it out loud.

Antal laughed. "And I you. Don't look so dismayed. The Swithin are honest about their feelings and you seem to be picking up our habits."

Uly smiled. "More than a few, and Markis says they're not all good. What?" he asked, when a strange look came over Antal's face.

Antal shook his head. "Nothing."

"What nothing?"

"It's difficult to get used to someone calling the prince by name. We all know him as Shavar. Take my advice. Although you have every right to speak his name, I suggest that if you should ever want to blend in, then you would do well to call him Shavar except to his face. Not that you will blend in easily with that hair and those eyes."

Antal reached out and smoothed a stray strand of hair behind Uly's ear. Looking into that smiling face, the touch seemed more intimate than it was. Antal was closer to his own age than Markis, not that the prince was that much older. Eight years separated them, but sometimes Uly felt far younger, and at other times older than he was. He was a young man, and the difference in his and the prince's age was not so great that anyone found it odd. Antal was the first man near his age that he had talked so openly with and it made Uly wonder about that. Antal was almost painfully easy to like. The brown hair contained light

tones, but none of the Swithin were blond. They had blond tones in their hair, even gold, but not the pale white blondness of Uly's hair. The medium length ponytail held the hair back from his face but he was fooling himself to think it looked anything like the braid Swithin men wore. He needed to be patient. In time, it would grow, but even braided, he would never look Swithin. He had heard of plants that could dye the hair. What would be the use of that? Markis loved his hair. Besides, he might no longer consider himself Simeon, and he might never be Swithin, but he could be something else. He was Uly Samir.

"I want to see how you fare hand-to-hand."

Uly frowned. Antal laughed.

"Don't look so concerned. Come now. You must have some cunning to have survived on the street." Antal's eyes sparkled but there seemed to be no malice in the amusement. "I can see why Shavar likes you. You have this strange combination of street wariness and innocence. It's a compliment," he added, "just in case you don't know. You could have let the world leave you bitter, but you managed to remain true to yourself despite what the world threw at you. Come over here."

Antal walked out of the way to the back of some of the wagons. The area gave them a little privacy and room to move. "Now I'll come at you slow and all I want you to do is explain what you would do. We're not doing this for real, mind. I just want to know how you would react, so tell me and show me, but there's no need for us to hurt each other. We've no ga'lin, only a dai'mean with us, but I wouldn't want to bother anyone because we were stupid. They wouldn't be pleased."

"What are they?"

"A healer and a soother. People that care for the sick. On a trip like this, a soother usually suffices. The biggest threat this trip should be blisters."

"Despite what happened the other day?" Uly referred to Markis calling on the comet's power, of course.

"We weren't expecting battle. We just needed to make a good show of force, though it could have come down to that. Still, guards largely know how to take care of themselves. I don't want either of us breaking our arm to prove a point here. Another guard would have to set it and none of us have much of a delicate touch."

"They sound like positions with titles. I thought words from the old tongue began with the same initial."

Antal laughed. "If all of them began with the same letter that would make for a very difficult language." His expression changed then and took on a thoughtful look. "Saying that, I admit it's difficult enough, which is why it died out for the most part, but you're right. Some of the old words remain and we use them for designations mostly, as titles. Some mean other things. Shaylah is a good swear word. It means blind or one that refuses to see, which doesn't sound so bad, but it's insult enough the way we mean it. You might hear some call you la ruan, but ignore them."

"What does that mean?"

Antal grinned. "It means thief, and not what you would call in a respectful way. You might get a few young ones whispering it under their breath but once they discover you are Samir to Shavar, it'll soon wipe the smirks from their faces. I don't know why our healers' titles differ, and they are the exception to the rule. Perhaps it's because they have their own importance. We believe there is no higher calling. All other designations begin with the letter S. As" -- he grinned again -- "Markis is Shavar, so Ryanac is Semari."

"I thought Ryanac was Silas."

"Ah, yes, he is." The smile became a little self-deprecating. "A very few carry more than one title. Ryanac was Silas before he became Semari. You will simply know him as Captain. He has the top rank." Antal paused. "Very well, let me run through the ranks. Semari is the ultimate leader. Sedryche is the line shields, men considered the backbone of any unit. There are three shields, line, flank, and reserve. Flanks are Seberto. Reserve we call Sarris, but the term also covers troops of a fort, so refers to most lower ranking guards in the regiment. We have spearmen, Sarvis being the highest rank of skill. Serrick is just below, and Sarrette is an old term referring to one who is brave. They have much to learn and only one way to learn it -- in battle. The polearms we call Serves and our archers are Saldorra. My father told me the word means "winged gift," though I suppose the arrow isn't a gift to whoever receives it. Some of the ancient language seems beautiful at first glance, but I've always found it perplexing. There are other, smaller ranks, but Sedek is the lowest. Sedek is someone who has successfully achieved permission to train. We were all Sedek once, even Ryanac, even Shavar."

"Could I become a Sedek?"

Antal seemed to consider it. "You're a little old to apply but it's possible; however, I don't think Shavar would want you apart from him, do you?"

Uly shook his head. He wouldn't want to be apart from the prince, either.

"Besides," Antal lowered his voice and glanced around. "Just between you and me, I'm not knocking the academies, but there is nothing that Ryanac cannot teach you. Now, let's begin."

Antal moved behind him. "Let's just pretend I've managed to creep up on you and got an arm around your throat."

Uly tensed even before he felt the arm slip around his neck and he reacted immediately. In the grip of anxiety, he almost lurched away. Before he could fight the other man off, however, Antal let go and took a step back.

"It's just a demonstration, Uly," Antal reminded him.

"I know. Sorry." He had no wish to explain, though. "Could we...could you just talk me through it?"



Something passed through Antal's eyes, but then the other man nodded. "I've come up behind you and put an arm across your throat. What would you do?"

What would he do? That largely depended on one thing -- whether or not he froze. Uly didn't say that, though. "What's your other hand doing?"

"Searching you for a purse."

"So you're preoccupied, no knife to my throat?"

"None."

Uly took a breath and slowly let it out, dampening the tension, expelling it. It was stupid of him to feel this way. They were only talking it through and, even so, he had nothing to fear from Antal. "If I could get to it, I'd draw my blade and if I could, I'd ram it back into your stomach."

A sort of stunned silence settled into the small area they shared alone. Antal regarded him, but rather than the look of horror Uly expected to see, the flush of surprise became one of mirth. Antal closed the distance. "I'm glad we're friends," he whispered into Uly's ear, "but if you think you've shocked me you have to be disappointed. It's good to know you'll do what you have to. I think you need to know when a situation calls for violence and on what level, though. Have you actually ever stabbed anyone?"

He didn't want to talk about it, but had no reason to lie. "No. I've come close."

"Well, saying you'll do it and doing it are two different things. Just give me a few alternatives to work with."

"I could stamp on your foot, but that seems rather lame. I know how to..." Uly took hold of Antal's wrist and demonstrated a turn that spun him away and put some distance between them.

Antal nodded. "Good. That, with the shock of stamping on someone's foot, or even kicking them in the leg might work, but it depends on the size of your opponent. Consider whether there's a knife, and how sturdy their footwear is. What else?"

"Is there a wall behind us?"

"No."

"Then I might..."

"Show me."

Uly stopped speaking; his mouth gaped. He failed to move, so Antal slowly circled him and settled against his back. He moved to put an arm around Uly's throat and Uly caught his forearm. "Don't." He couldn't explain it. This was so foolish. He had once struggled in Ryanac's arms in a more compromising position than this, and Markis had lain along his back as they made love. Markis had also gripped him about the throat, but that had been with his hands, his fingers. Perhaps he just couldn't stand the arm at his throat. He tugged Antal's arm down across his chest and that felt better. That he could cope with. "I might do this," Uly

said, and without warning, he propelled them back, stopping after a few steps and catching hold of Antal so he wouldn't fall. The young man laughed softly.

"If you combined that with a few other moves it would work really well. If you were by the docks, you could put an assailant in the water, though the risk is you could go in yourself. There are places you can pinch to get someone off you and I'd try those first. Personally, if the position were right, I would have given my attacker a head-butt back into his nose. You might shatter bone and you should at least blind him with pain."

The slight smile Uly held on his face faltered and vanished. A twitch disturbed his brow and he lowered his gaze.

"What's wrong?"

Uly shook his head. "Nothing. I haven't been down to the docks for years."

"I don't blame you. I hated your city. No offence intended."

"Offend all you want. What were you doing there? What rank are you? Shouldn't you still be at an academy?"

"I'm Sarris and am waiting to become Seberto. I tried to be an archer rather than a shield man, but my bows just refused to fly true." Antal grinned then and looked like a younger version of Ryanac in all but features. Uly could see either of them blaming their weapons rather than their skill. Only in fun though.

"Uly." Antal caught his attention. "I'd love to spar with you. You did the one thing I was looking for. You didn't try to drag my grip from your neck; you looked for other ways out and for vulnerable places. I can teach you more vulnerable spots than you will believe exist. There are moves I can teach you hand-to-hand. Also, how to hide blades. Between us, Ryanac and I will keep you alive and safe."

Uly looked over his shoulder across the open land to where he judged Markis's tent stood. *Alive and safe*. Once, that would have been enough. "I should get back."

"You're meant to stay here tonight."

"Will you try to keep me here?" Uly grinned back when Antal smiled at his deliberate choice of words.

"The way you fight, no."

Uly raised an eyebrow.

"Most guards fight one way and usually that's good enough because other guards fight that way, too. It's kind of a stalemate."

"You're a guard."

"That doesn't mean I'm not unique. The real backbone of a troop isn't dependent on rank. It's on the men who can slip in their own variations with the right intuition. Ryanac taught me that. Why do you think he sent you to me?"

Uly could see the logic of that. "And you're so modest."

“Modesty’s fine, but not if it gets you killed. I can see you want to be with Shavar tonight. Unless you know some reason you shouldn’t go back, then get on out of here. It’ll be a half hour canter through the troops, and I’ll get you something to eat on the way.”

Uly nodded his thanks but said nothing about any reason he should keep away. He had heard Markis was to have a lesson, but he wasn’t sure he quite believed it. If that were the case, then it would be alone, or under Ryanac’s guidance, for no seers were in camp. He had a feeling they were up to something else, though. Either way, he needed to know the truth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everywhere Ryanac looked, he saw black. Wherever he turned his head nothing existed, but then he wasn’t turning his head, not physically anyway. A wave of sickness rose up, dizzying. Speckles of gold rushed in to warm him and chased it back. Some of these particles looked so pale they reminded him of Uly’s hair. Then he shivered from sudden heat. He wanted and *needed*, was willing to plead to be touched. Something responded, but it wasn’t another person. He tried to jerk away from it and it turned vicious. Ice bit at him until he could well imagine it had teeth. If he could have looked at his body, he would have expected to see blood.

RYANAC, STOP THIS. STOP FIGHTING IT.

Markis?

He received a mental image of Markis with an uneasy smile and it almost sent him spinning, untethered through the depths of the...*abyss*. Suddenly, he knew this place. He also felt concern and a...reaching out. Markis touched him and he was unprepared for it. He howled.

HUSH. STOP IT.

He had some sense of an underlying amusement, of Markis thinking he behaved like a little girl.

*Fuck you. I am not afraid, just...* Too many sensations drove his mind blank.

I’M NOT REALLY TOUCHING YOU. WE’RE NOT TRULY HERE, SO I CAN’T. THINK. BECOME AWARE OF YOUR BODY.

His body, yes. As he thought of it, Ryanac gained some sense of solidity. He became aware that his body sat naked with Markis pressed close against him. Their legs and other things entwined.

THAT’S BETTER.

*So glad you approve.* He couldn’t keep the wry sarcasm from his voice even here. Ryanac took a steadying breath though he didn’t know how, and looked around. He couldn’t tell how he did this, but there was no other explanation for it. He took in his surroundings. Gold slid across his vision, causing him to flinch back.

DON’T FIGHT IT. BELIEVE ME, THE GOLD IS GOOD.

*We're not actually speaking, are we?*

NO. Somehow, in his head Markis gave a mental shake.

*This is where the comet takes you?* He didn't mean to sound so appalled, but a sense of horror filled him and, straightaway, Markis's feelings flowed back. Markis had said they could hide nothing from each other here. Apparently, he spoke the truth. The horror caused Markis anguish and...embarrassment?

I DON'T NEED PITY.

Sudden anger chased those emotions away. Ryanac didn't argue, but instead considered his feelings and accepted that what he felt was a little akin to pity, but there was something else. No use his hiding it. The pain of sudden tears, the prickling one got at the back of the eyes that warned of a harsher onset, greeted Ryanac's frustration. In a single moment, he had unwittingly shown Markis how frustrated he felt all these years not being able to help more, to ease Markis's burden, to share his pain, and now that made his friend want to cry, of all things. Once more, he sensed Markis trying to turn away.

He...tugged at Markis. That was a poor description, but he couldn't reach out and take hold. The closest he could liken it to was that they were pure spirit, pure essence, and in this form they could float around each other like vaporous fog. *You're the one who said we couldn't hide from each other. Don't turn away.*

Markis responded, almost shyly. They regarded each other uneasily. This feeling was the strangest of all. They knew each other. Here, it felt as if they were strangers. Their touch was tentative, but this wasn't just a touch of the body; it was a touch of the mind. It seemed silly when they knew each other so well. When they trusted...

Yes, they trusted each other. That emotion above all else sang out. Complete trust and complete faith helped force the fear, not away, but into the background. *Now what?*

NOW, WE CHOOSE A MEMORY.

Markis opted for a poor choice of words. Memories rushed in. Ryanac gasped and, on top of his pain, Markis's thoughts rushed in, doubling the two men over. Even in the real world, their bodies tightened and both were aware of it.

A blade swept by the side of Ryanac's face. It just missed his eye and sliced his cheek, leaving him with a light scar. The pain was sudden and almost disabling. Only adrenaline and the need for survival saved him.

Markis slid in a tunnel of ice, dragging stars in his wake. It gave him pleasure, held him on the crest of orgasm. It also froze his skin, his flesh, threatened to stop his heart.

Ryanac laughed at the man who had just thrown a beer in his face, anticipating the oncoming fight with a peculiar glee.

"Do you really want to sleep, my little thief?" the prince whispered into Uly's ear.

Contentment fed desire. Ryanac caught the eye of a pretty woman and flashed her that smile of his. His cock throbbed with longing.

Markis huddled under fine bedding, wishing his father hadn't come into the room, and praying to the comet the man wouldn't discover him crying. The taste in the back of his throat was thick with snot and tears.

Ryanac stood before his mother staring into her crimson face; he had done something to enrage her so that she was threatening to take the strap to him. He felt no fear, only sorrow.

Markis knelt with his eyes closed, savouring the length of a man's cock stroking down into his throat a long time ago. This was the last day they had seen each other before leaving for separate academies.

Someone swung a strap at Ryanac, but he was older and it wasn't his mother; he grunted, cried out, but it wasn't entirely pain.

Water rushed into his throat and brought panic with it; Markis believed he would drown and he thought of his family, but Ryanac's face was right there with them.

Ryanac sat watching Markis while the prince in turn watched Uly. The young man tasted chocolate for the first time, but Ryanac's interest was solely for the look on Markis's face.

Markis spiralled in the abyss.

The images came overlapping and overcrowding, pushing the emotions out. *Markis!* Ryanac made it a shout.

I KNOW.

All very well, but if one of them didn't stop this it might destroy them both. It felt as though his brain might explode. Pain spiked inside his mind. Still, he sensed Markis taking control. The memories eased, faded, flashing at the periphery of their minds but held at bay. *Maybe this isn't such a good idea*, Ryanac opined.

When he received no response, he believed that maybe Markis took him at his word. Another thought occurred to him. How did they get out of this?

Markis smiled. THAT PART'S EASY. WE JUST WISH OUR WAY OUT.

*Wish?*

Somehow, someway, Markis shrugged. HARD TO EXPLAIN. TRY IT IF YOU WANT.

Ryanac tentatively willed himself away and back to his body. *It's not working.*

BECAUSE YOU DON'T REALLY WANT TO LEAVE.

Damn. Markis was right. *What would happen if we didn't want to go? Could we find ourselves trapped here?*

NO. OUR BODIES HAVE NEEDS. A SIMPLE THING SUCH AS THIRST WOULD EVENTUALLY CALL US OUT.

*You're certain?*

YES. DON'T ASK ME HOW I KNOW. I JUST DO. THAT'S THE WAY IT'S ALWAYS BEEN WITH THE COMET. IT REACTS ALMOST AS IF IT HAS INTELLIGENCE. IT WANTS ME TO LIVE.

*And now?* Ryanac was still aware of the flashing images and random emotions hovering around them.

WHERE DO YOU WANT TO START?

He gave it some thought, and then smiled. He didn't even have to tell Markis. The prince knew and nodded. The smell of baking bread rushed in. Ryanac smiled. They were in his mother's kitchen.

## Chapter Eight

Something had changed. For a moment, the puzzlement of that distracted Ryanac from what Markis said.

IT'S FINE. WE'RE BLENDING.

He was about to ask what Markis meant, and then he knew. Markis looked around the room, his eye wandering over pots that needed washing, a stew bubbling away on the fire, bread baking in the small brick oven. These aromas made one salivate, but the dominant smell was of sage and rosemary. Together, they looked up to the beam above their heads. Ryanac's mother pinned and dried out large sprigs of herbs there.

*I know what you're feeling.*

AND I YOU.

A combined sense of wistfulness settled over them and at once made the two of them laugh.

*This is the first day you came here.*

Markis nodded. I FELL OFF MY HORSE AND YOUR FATHER HAD THE CHEEK TO TELL OFF THE GUARD THAT ACCOMPANIED ME. I THINK THE MAN WAS SO SHOCKED A FARMER WOULD TELL OFF A MAN WITH A SWORD THAT HE CAME ALONG MEEKLY. I THINK HE RATHER WISHED HE HADN'T WHEN HE MET YOUR MOTHER. YOUR FATHER WAS NOTHING COMPARED TO HER SHARP TONGUE.

*I remember. The guard wanted you to just get back on the horse and ignore the fact that you were bleeding.*

I NEEDED TO GET BACK, BUT YOUR MOTHER INVITED ME FOR DINNER ANYTIME, AND THE KING INCLUDED. MY FATHER WAS SO AMUSED BY THAT, HE LET ME VISIT. The wistful feeling returned. THINGS WERE SO DIFFERENT BACK THEN.

I COULD RIDE AROUND THE COUNTRY QUITE SAFELY. NOW OUR LANDS ARE TOO LARGE AND EXPAND TOO FAR.

*When all those memories spilled over us, why were you crying in one of them?*

The sudden enquiry stumped the prince. Reluctance shone out.

*You don't have to share this with me.*

NO. IF WE'RE GOING TO DO THIS, WE SHOULD HIDE NOTHING. I CANNOT ASK THE SAME OF YOU IF I CANNOT DO THIS MYSELF. IN TRUTH, IF YOU WANTED TO, YOU COULD DRAG US TO THE MEMORY AND I TO YOURS. THE ONLY WAY EITHER OF US CAN STOP IT IS TO DRAW COMPLETELY OUT OF THIS.

Ryanac blinked in surprise.

DID I NEGLECT TO MENTION THAT? Markis remarked with a wry smile.

*So, I really can't hide anything?* He put concern into the question, aware that Markis would also be aware of the teasing behind it, and aware that Markis would know he knew... *Aagghh.*

STEADY.

*This takes some getting used to.*

YET THE SENSATION CAUSES YOU MORE DISTURBANCE THAN MY KNOWING.

That was true. *I've nothing I want to hide from you.* Even as he said it -- thought it? -- he knew it for a mistake.

LIAR. BUT WE'LL HAVE TO TRUST EACH OTHER. IT'S NATURAL WE'RE BOTH STILL CAUTIOUS AND UNEASY. IN ADDITION, WE'RE SWITHIN, BUT WE'RE STILL MEN. THIS IS TOO TOUCHY-FEELY.

Sweet silence descended while they simply drifted, aware of one another. The sound of Markis's stifled sniffles broke in upon them.

They stood in the young prince's room, but the view was of what Markis had seen that long-ago night. He was under the covers, crying quietly into his pillow. Aware his father entered the room, he caught his breath and lay still.

"You think you can fool the king, Markis?" Amazingly, the warmth of a father's love laced the voice. Ryanac had time to wonder why Markis felt the astonishment of that and received the answer before he completed the thought. An impression filled his mind of a harsh man and even harsher treatment. He winced as he felt a large, scarred hand grab his small young boy's wrist and drag him along a corridor. Those hands bore scars from lessons gone wrong with the comet. That same man shouted into his face a hundred times, grabbed him by the hair and, when older, berated him in front of mature and important men.

*We don't actually have to talk here, do we? I mean, we don't even have to think.*



NO. ACCORDING TO THE BOOK, WE COULD EXPERIENCE EACH OTHER'S LIVES IN A BLINK, BUT I BELIEVE IT WOULD BE TOO OVERWHELMING. IT COULD EVEN KILL US.

*You're stopping that from happening.* The moment Ryanac thought it, he knew it to be true. He didn't bother to wait for Markis's reply. Howsoever the prince was doing it didn't matter right now, and Markis received the message. Some things still seemed polite to ask.

*Why this night?*

IT WASN'T THE ONLY NIGHT HE WAS GENTLE, BUT THIS ONE I REMEMBER MOST.

A hand came down to touch his face and lift his chin. Markis resisted. The father sighed. The king had taken his son from the bed and sat him in his lap before the window. "This small time is nothing. Your brother's teasing is nothing."

*Teasing? You were crying because you'd been teased? And by your younger brother?*

The pain and torment of those years, all the nasty tricks Mairtin had played on him, all the trouble his brother got him into, things the king punished his first son for, even knowing he wasn't to blame, weighed in. Along with this anger, there existed a clear sense of Markis not liking him just now. Ryanac sent his apologies. He also gave a shrug. He had experienced bullying in his day, but he always beat them up. A sense of fear answered his argument. Markis had feared that if he did anything to stop Mairtin, his brother would turn on the youngest of the three, and Kilan had been a big enough disappointment to their father. Markis did everything he could to keep anyone from noticing the youngest of his brothers.

"You will be Shavar one day," the king continued. "They say you are strong, do you know that?" The king's hand stroked his son's head.

"Strong?" The young Markis asked his father. The sniffles and snuffling sounds eased.

"I have a feeling about you. That you will be stronger than I am. Let Mairtin eat that slice of cake, then."

Relief warred with a small taste of encroaching terror. A small boy had just discovered the size of the weight he would one day carry.

To say Markis's feelings for his father were ambiguous was putting it mildly. The fact that he had allowed Markis to run away to the farm and even gone out of his way to deter those who thought his son should spend most, if not all of his time in the palace, spoke of love. So, too, did his harsh treatment in some ways. He had tried to make Markis hard, but the father remained dissatisfied. When he sent his son to the Azulite plains, he had wanted Markis to wipe out their race with his power, and put a stop to those who would contest his will for the last time. Markis had defied him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ryanac turned his mind to the day Markis sat bleeding in his kitchen. So, this was the king's son. He hadn't thought much of him.

THANKS. Markis's sarcasm made the abyss grow heavy.

When he returned for a meal, it irritated the hell out of Ryanac. Didn't the upstart get enough food up at the palace? Why had his mother invited him along, and why did he come? Why bring her flowers, as a courting man would do? Compliments of the king? He doubted it. He let Markis know all of this.

THEY WERE FROM ME.

*I thought as much.*

The third visit was too much insult. Ryanac had tried to pound Markis into the ground.

WHAT STOPPED YOU?

The question was reasonable. He honestly didn't know. Something, while he wiped Markis's face in the dirt, changed, and Ryanac had started laughing. Markis, at last managing to roll over, frowned up at him. When Ryanac recovered, he said sorry. Wariness settled in, but then the young Markis smiled. He had returned home with a cut lip and a bruised face, and the king hadn't said a word. Now, Markis caught his feelings of that night when as a young boy, Ryanac had finally realised he actually tried to beat up one of the young princes.

*Stop laughing. I felt sure the king would kill me.*

Their childhood passed quickly. The fast-moving, blurred images were not so different from the actual experience. Other arguments and fights they shared, sometimes against each other, sometimes against others, until they no longer fought between themselves but only against outsiders. Perhaps that was an odd thought, but the feeling behind the sentiment, that it was the two young men against everyone else, was genuine. Now they gasped and winced from the memory of the blows. More images assaulted them of stealing apples and stealing kisses from twin sisters, daughters of a family friend who visited them one summer. Then stealing sips of alcohol until, over time, they had stolen so much they needed to water down the brew. Ryanac's father declared the barrel a bust and nothing but piss water. He never did figure out why one single barrel failed. Terror leapt when Markis fell through the cover over the old well. There shouldn't have been any water down there -- it had been dry for many years -- but there was, and just as well or he would have broken his bones, but still Markis had believed he was going to die. Sheer, white panic, the sides of the well too slippery to hold, the water closing over his head, engulfing sound; Markis had never been a strong swimmer. Disbelief came on the heels of terror.

YOU JUMPED INTO THE WELL.

He had. Ryanac had sent their companions running for help and he had jumped down into the well to save Markis. A tinge of embarrassment washed through him. *Yeah, I'm your hero.* The self-deprecation was wasted. Markis had never forgotten what he had done. They both knew he would do it again. To this day, Markis hadn't known the sudden heart-

crushing fear Ryanac felt, not for himself but for Markis. Ryanac hadn't thought twice about leaping into the well. To this day, Ryanac hadn't known that Markis had thought of never seeing his family again, but also of never seeing Ryanac either. They both turned aside from each other.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP?

They had both known this would be uncomfortable, and this was just the small events. They had no need to speak or project their thoughts. Now, they simply knew. Ryanac had two things on his mind -- *Do you?* and *No*. Markis was praying Ryanac would go on. Gratitude and fear came from Markis, followed by the personal embarrassment that Ryanac knew even these emotions. Ryanac smiled. They sped through the rest of their childhood side by side, together.

## Chapter Nine

*We're*

IN

*the*

BARN.

The thought was instantaneous. On its heels again came the question whether or not they should stop.

That long-ago evening started with Ryanac being his usual self. Smugness rode the thought. Markis shot back irritation. Ryanac laughed. It was his idea, of course, to visit the next farm over.

"Isn't she beautiful?"

Now, Markis groaned. The abyss responded by growing cold.

*Don't do that. And don't argue. She was beautiful, and now I know you felt it too.*

"Is this what you do of a night? Peek at your neighbours." Markis's disapproval still came through over distance and time. Now, as then, Ryanac shrugged and grinned.

"She likes to bathe with the lantern alight and no curtains drawn. Perhaps she knows or longs for someone to see."

CAN WE SKIP THIS? WE BOTH KNOW WHAT HAPPENED.

*Nevertheless, I don't know how you felt.*

The woman had stripped as though for an audience. At her feet lay a large iron tub. The thought of her kneeling in it and sponging down her skin, water streaming over her, had brought a lump to Markis's throat and to other places.

*I hadn't realised the sight of her aroused you so.*

If he could have, even as a grown man, the prince would have blushed. Ryanac chuckled while Markis groaned.

“Her man is home?” The farmer moved into view and Markis complained.

*You really thought he might drag you back to the king in disgrace.* It wasn’t a question. Ryanac found it utterly amusing. The memory of Ryanac cursing as Markis tried to wriggle back down the slope chased the amusement away. Ryanac gave an easy shrug as the scene proceeded. He was the one who brought them here, chose this memory of their first time together. He truly wanted to see it from Markis’s viewpoint but, of course, that meant Markis would know how it had affected him, too. Ryanac couldn’t stop it, short of calling them out and leaving the abyss. They had argued, the younger Ryanac pressing Markis into the dirt with his weight. Ryanac’s annoying chuckles rang out.

*Annoying? You really find me annoying?*

YES. NO. There was no point in lying; Ryanac could feel the truth of that ambiguous answer. This time his chuckle rang through the abyss. DON’T DO THAT.

*You act as if it might be listening.* Ryanac indicated the space around them.

Markis shrugged. FOR ALL I KNOW, IT IS.

As disturbing as that thought was, the scene called them back. They watched the couple begin what could only be a long session of lovemaking.

“Isn’t he as beautiful? Aren’t they just the most beautiful couple?”

At once, the abyss filled with a sense of Markis’s unease. Ryanac frowned. His whole being was one of question. Back then, whenever he spoke of men, Markis had acted uneasy.

The memory of Ryanac sighed. “Now what? What’s wrong with you? You always get like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’ve said or done something wrong.”

*You wanted me.* The realisation stunned Ryanac on a level he couldn’t have explained. Markis felt it; that’s why they were here, to share. The prince felt it, and a strange kind of anguish settled in. An apology lay in there somewhere, and Ryanac understood. The young prince hadn’t been sure he wanted a man because he had wanted Ryanac, and they were going off to separate academies. They might not see each other again. Not only that, the prince faced years of celibacy. He hadn’t been able to put this into words then, hadn’t understood why he hesitated. It was the way of the Swithin to take lovers of either sex, and he couldn’t place all of his hesitation on Ryanac or the comet, but they had certainly contributed.

“Don’t you want to try anything hard?”

The younger Markis gasped as his friend wriggled. The ground beneath them gave a little so that the prince could picture them sinking into it until they were swallowed up by the earth. He involuntarily opened his legs, perhaps to lift up onto his hands and knees. His

companion had other ideas. He forced Markis tighter to the ground with the press of his hips.

The disembodied version of Markis gasped now. Ryanac's desire rose up like a sweet taste in their mouths and made both of them flinch. Ryanac wanted to close his eyes, his mind, his emotions off, but you couldn't do that here in the abyss. So, Markis knew he wanted him -- it was hardly as though he made a secret of it, then or now. Again, there came that flicker of embarrassment as they lived one another's emotions, but they rode it out. Part of young Markis opened, yearned. He had panicked, ran back to the barn in tears. Now the pain of that moment made Markis hug himself. He wasn't here, he didn't have arms, and yet he drew them across his stomach to suppress the pain. Sorrow engulfed him, sorrow that he had been so afraid. Ryanac took that sorrow on board and swallowed it down.

"I didn't mean to upset you." The words the guard had said that night echoed in the abyss now. He meant it as much now as then.

OH, RYANAC.

*Hush. We made love.*

A sense of that being enough filled the space around them.

"You're so much more experienced than me."

Markis laughed. He had said that. A sudden awareness of how much more experience Ryanac had made him gasp. Ryanac hadn't meant to share that quite so blatantly, but the abyss had other ideas. The incorporeal version of the prince stared at Ryanac with wide eyes. Ryanac looked away and then struggled not to grin.

YOU SLUT!

*You enjoyed my experience.*

"Don't move like that," young Ryanac warned, but too late. Nothing could disguise the hardness growing against him. On top of the memory, an overlapping sensation of how Markis had moved to make his friend hard like that melded with how good his friend's weight felt against his back. If Markis liked his weight on top, beneath Ryanac, the prince had felt unbelievable. That long ago night, Ryanac would have moved away. A shake of Markis's head had him settling back into place and gave his desire new hope.

That night the sight of a patch of exposed neck was too much to resist. Ryanac placed a kiss against the soft, warm skin. "You don't know what I would give to be your first."

The memory was too much. Yearning and desire washed in. Even his spirit in the abyss could grow hard. Ryanac could feel that first flush of Markis's desire centering where it had never been before, seeking and opening. Now, the prince felt it as he had then for the first time, and beside him, Ryanac shook with the knowledge. Ryanac tried to hold it in, but he made Markis shiver with his desire to sink into him. They had both wanted the same thing. Licked wet fingers penetrated a small, tight ring. The two men shouted both from the penetration and from the promise of a hot, tight grip.

*You really wanted to twist against the blanket?*

Yes, Markis had. Only the thought of what a lewd picture he would have made had kept him still. Ryanac only laughed and sent him a vision. Markis's spiritual eyes widened; his mouth gaped.

*Yes, you did look that enticing.*

"Pity we haven't more." Laughter filled the voice, and it was possible to hear Ryanac grinning. Something hard and slippery touched Markis and he frowned. It took him a moment to realise Ryanac had greased his fingers.

YOU DID USE THE BUTTER, Markis groaned. The only grease they had was butter meant for the bread.

A warm chuckle stroked over his skin, carried on golden stars. It trailed away. They came to the part where Markis had just wanted Ryanac inside him. What Markis hadn't been able to feel was his friend's restraint. The young Ryanac's gaze dropped to his cock, slight consternation touching him as he saw how red and swollen his member was. He had almost been too afraid to put it in, unsure which one of them he believed he might hurt.

Ryanac had wanted Markis the moment they came of age and discovered sex. He had never believed it would happen. He had set his heart to being his friend. Now they saw and remembered; unrequited love repaid in the joining of flesh pulled Markis's head back. Ryanac moved inside him. "My prince," whispered into his ear, and it tore at Markis's heart, as it never had before. The prince had believed the fact that it pleased him was pure sentimentality on his part, though that made it no less precious. He had believed Ryanac only teased. Markis's shock filled the void as he learned how sincerely Ryanac meant those words.

"You're so open and wet."

Markis cried out. They had fucked twice that first night and relived the moment now, but now the sensation doubled. Both men could feel Ryanac's questing fingers. Two fingers dipped into the slick heat, withdrew, only to plunge again. Ryanac could feel the prince experiencing this as if it were his own hand. Both men could feel fingers delving, receiving and giving. Their minds reliving the vision remained aware that they were sharing this in the present. Four levels of emotion, four senses... They were aware of each other here and now, aware of each other in the past, and in the midst of all that, their bodies existed in reality.

*Markis.*

I KNOW.

They weren't thoughts. They were two minds becoming one.

RIDE IT OUT.

*Are you sure?*

DO YOU WANT TO LEAVE THIS?

*Yes. No. It hurts.*

THEN DRAW AWAY. WISH YOURSELF BACK TO THE WORLD.

*I can't. I won't.*

It did hurt. Pleasure could all too easily become a type of pain, but this went beyond. Overload; the thought emerged as one. They could wish themselves out of this, but both were unwilling to leave the other, to make this stop. Images and sensations, sounds crashed in. Ryanac on his back, grinning, his eyes shut tight, internal muscles clenching; Markis on hands and knees, a solid length spearing into him; the feel of a hot wet mouth; sighs, giggles, gasps, wet sucking...

In the abyss, both men screamed. In the darkness, and in reality, they convulsed. They spilled, pulsing liquid heat splashing over sensitised flesh, burning as volatile as a tempest...

TAKE US SOMEWHERE. TAKE US OUT OF HERE.

*Where?*

ANYWHERE!

Markis screamed out the word and the force of his desperation was enough to send Ryanac's mind to a place of horror and darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Staring down at the two men, Uly wanted to be angry. All he could think was how beautiful they were. He opened his mouth to speak Markis's name, and then closed it again. They were unaware of him, he was certain. Their eyes were open but unfocused, their mouths slightly parted though not quite slack. Each had their right hand pressed to the other's heart. In all this, they looked utterly relaxed. Their left hands told a different story. They gripped at each other's body in a display of tension, Ryanac's hand at Markis's hip, Markis's hand clawing at Ryanac's arm. Blood marred the tips of his fingers where Markis dug his nails in. Either Ryanac couldn't feel it or he didn't care. The big man had suffered worse wounds but still, to sit there oblivious gave Uly pause.

There was also the golden ball of light that surrounded them, of course. Markis had called to the comet, but Uly had no idea for what purpose. Could the circle protect them, the way it had fought off the Azulite army? He was not about to reach out and touch it to test the theory, though if the circle offered no protection, then they sat here utterly vulnerable. Fine; they were in the midst of a regiment of their own men, but this was still foolish. Anger at finding them together like this when Markis had so clearly sent him out of the way, coupled with the anger that the two men would allow themselves to be so vulnerable, set his teeth on edge. Apart from that clawed hand, Markis didn't appear to be in pain. Could a man ejaculate from pain alone? If so, what kind of pain would cause it? Uly wasn't sure he wanted to find out.



His gaze flickered down to their laps. The two men sat facing each other, each with one leg over and one leg under the other's leg. Here, right now, Uly could drink in his fill, the sight of them boring into his mind. Something told him he should look away, but he couldn't. He stared at them, moving his eyes only so much as to take in every detail, almost wishing to burn the image into his brain. Ryanac had slightly more hair than Markis, a soft mat covering his legs, thinning out at his thigh to grow thicker at his groin, dark with no silver threads. Lines of hair snaked up to thin out and disappear just below his navel. It began again about four inches higher and fanned out over his pecs. The tops of his arms were smooth, rounded, solid, set off by a broad back. The only hair covering him there was his long black and silver tresses. The skin of his lower face was slightly rough and shadowed, though he might well have shaved an hour ago. Uly knew this, for Ryanac had grabbed him once and tried to give him a burn, laughing as he did so. In contrast, Markis's skin was mostly smooth. Soft hair coated the backs of his arms and his lower legs; the hair on his thighs was a paler shade and so fine one might not know it was there without touching it.

Though it felt sinful to be lingering on their bodies and ignoring their handsome faces, Markis's drowning eyes, or the sharp line of Ryanac's chin, Uly could look at their faces anytime, and he much preferred their expressions animated with life, rather than staring like this. He swallowed as he looked down once again. Their cocks were rigid, ripe and thick, shiny with dripping sap. More thick secretions covered their skin. How had this happened? What caused them to come without touching each other sexually? At least he now understood Markis's clawed hand.

Moving around the makeshift bed, Uly's gaze wandered until it fell on the book. He recognised it at once. How could he not? Markis had mentioned stealing something at the gathering on the Azu plains and Uly had agreed to do that. Next morning, Markis took him aside and asked him to get the book. From the expression on the prince's face, Uly felt certain the request had been a spur of the moment thing. He stole it from Stargazer, of all people. He would not have done that for anyone other than Markis. He doubted he would even have had the courage to do it for Ryanac. There was something scary about that old man.

Bending, Uly tugged the book forward. He glanced up at the two men, but they sat there just as unmoving. Gathering it up in his arms, for the book was weighty and thick, he edged back until he felt the edge of the chair. Sitting down, he placed the book on his lap and began to read from the open page.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### WHERE ARE WE?

Ryanac gave him the answer as the two stared out over a battlefield strewn with the dead. Not the dying though, for those they could heal they had dragged away in the night. This battle took place at the Kimber Pass, a war they had not asked for, done everything to

avoid. The king, Markis's father, stopped the larger battle by threat -- much as Markis had stopped the Swithin going to war with the Azulite -- but the man's power could not cover the pass as well. There, they fought hand-to-hand. Unlike his father, Markis couldn't help wondering if his power might be strong enough to have protected both regiments. Ryanac wondered the same thing. Both looked at each other with rueful amusement. His father had done the right thing, protected the greater number, but to hear of this battle, to see the figures and names of the dead written on the page, was entirely different than seeing it with one's eyes. A pink sky bled over the bluff terrain. The ground appeared to contain small mounds of black rocks until you picked out that those piles were human remains. The caw of crows announced the scavengers as they flittered back and forth. Thankfully, the smell of wood smoke filled the nostrils, smothering all other odours.

I LOOKED FOR YOUR NAME ON THE LIST OF THE DEAD.

Markis did nothing to hide the relief and the tears of release he shed when he had not found his friend listed amongst the deceased. He wanted to feel bad for everyone else, but fear for his friend had overridden everything. Ryanac's wonder filled the abyss. It was one thing to know someone loved you, but to feel such a level of emotion...

The moment was interrupted by someone in the memory coming close to Ryanac's side where he crouched surveying the battlefield. A firm grip settled on his right shoulder.

"Come away."

*Errick Samari*, Ryanac provided. He had been in charge of the regiment, Ryanac's captain. Ryanac held the rank of Seberto at the time. After the battle, Errick put Ryanac forward for promotion to Sedryche, one step away from Captain himself. His next promotion had come from Markis.

Ryanac, surveying the sea of dead bodies, nodded but didn't move. The hand on his shoulder squeezed. "Whatever you're feeling, it's natural."

"I don't feel anything," Ryanac murmured. He didn't, couldn't, hadn't. Even now, looking back on it, all he felt was empty. So much waste ought to have stronger emotions attached to it.

"That's common too," was all Errick Samari said. "We'll do what we can for the dead, but we need to see to the living first. Ryanac." That calm, firm voice called to him. The younger man turned his head. "You need stitches."

He had almost forgotten the cut on his cheek. A slow, spreading smile touched the captain's lips. "We don't want that pretty face scarred too much, do we?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Uly read the page twice. Alas, it only made a twisted kind of sense. If he understood the power of the comet more, perhaps he would know what Markis and Ryanac were trying to do. How could one enter another's life, another's spirit? Looking up, he jerked so hard he

almost dropped the book. The two men had moved, drawn closer. They clung together, their heads turned aside from one another, and Markis stared straight at him. Uly swallowed and then frowned. Those eyes still looked blank, unfocused. The golden flecks that had appeared in those chocolate brown eyes when Markis called so much power on the Azu plains seemed to swirl. Then recognition swam back into the man's gaze even as Uly watched.

Uly stopped breathing for a few seconds. The conviction that Markis could see him made Uly wonder why the man didn't move. The prince just rested, held in Ryanac's arms, returning the embrace. Whatever they had done, it seemed to have taken its toll. Finally, Ryanac pulled back. As he sat up straighter, Markis's head slipped from the other man's neck to his chest. Markis still watched Uly, but he didn't move. The guard turned his head to look his way.

"What are you doing here?"

Uly would have liked the question to come from Markis. He wasn't sure he liked the look on the prince's face. Glancing up into Ryanac's dark and somewhat foreboding eyes, Uly found his voice. "I was worried, so I came back."

"You were ordered to stay away." Despite the warning, Ryanac didn't sound angry. Tonight of all nights, Uly refused to be bullied.

"I wasn't aware it was an order."

The guard seemed to struggle for a moment, and then he grinned. "You make an order sound like such a bad thing. I take orders. If it's good enough for me, it's good enough for you."

"You take orders when you choose to."

Ryanac stared at him with an incredulous look, and even Markis's eyes widened a little, although he looked a little too shocked for Uly to take it purely for amusement. It came as a surprise to hear Ryanac say, "Granted." For once, the big man didn't argue. He just agreed. That alarmed Uly more. "You should still have stayed away."

"On the contrary. I'd say it was a good thing I returned." Uly waited for Ryanac to look at him. "What were you thinking sitting here like this, completely vulnerable to attack?" He watched while Ryanac digested this.

"How long have you been here?" Ryanac asked.

"A while. Two, maybe three hours," Uly answered.

"I didn't realise," Markis murmured what sounded like an apology, but it was aimed at Ryanac, not Uly. That fact made Uly clench his teeth.

The big man stroked the prince's skin as one might soothe a child. Then he smiled. "You sat and watched over us."

It was no question. Heat rushed into Uly's face. He looked down and then away. No one moved. No one spoke. Finally, he stood up. "I've been here too long. I need some air." He wouldn't go far, but he needed to leave the tent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Uly hadn't hid the anguish in his eyes. He couldn't, didn't want to, or didn't realise it shone out so clearly. Markis was aware he should go to him, but right now, he wasn't sure he could stand. Ryanac continued to stroke him and right when it seemed they should feel closer than ever, everything felt disconnected. He asked if Ryanac felt the same thing.

The head against his moved in a nod. "I don't think we've sorted out vision from reality just yet." With the suggestion, Markis almost swooned. He closed his eyes, opened them again and blinked, fighting a wave of dizziness. He heard Ryanac hiss and looked up to see the cuts his fingernails had left. Ryanac met his gaze, smiling. "I'm thinking I can guess when you did this." Their stomachs and other things were wet.

Markis swallowed and looked at Ryanac soberly.

"Are you sure you want to do that again?" Ryanac asked, and Markis's response was to cluck in impatience. "You know what I mean." Ryanac meant share the abyss, not get each other so wet.

It was only fair that he consider the question. "I'd like to say no, but I fear I'll always wonder how things could be between us if we saw this out to the end. I just don't want to lose what we have."

"Markis." Ryanac lifted his chin by hooking a finger under it. "What we discovered tonight is that our feelings for each other are genuine and entirely mutual. Why would that make us lose what we have?"

It would be so easy to agree, but that wouldn't be fair to either of them. "Stranger things have happened," Markis said. Right now, one of the things he loved was walking away from him. He scrambled to his feet, grabbed a cloak, and swirled it around him to cover his nakedness. Barefoot and unarmed, he hurried to the flap of the tent, aware of Ryanac's quiet but unmistakable curse at his back. "Stay," Markis snapped. They were in a camp of their own men. If an assassin had wanted to kill them tonight, Uly was right, and he or she could have done it while they sat oblivious to the real world.

Sand and small stones bit into his feet but he could see Uly clearly a few feet out into the darkness. The moonlight made the pale hair gleam. He had expected Uly to stride away, but there was something dejected in the young man's movements. The slow pace meant Markis could catch up to him easily.

\* \* \* \* \*

A combination of things alerted Uly to Markis's approach -- the slap of the tent flap being tossed back and then falling; the soft rasp of feet on the ground, although by the soft sound and the fact there hadn't been time to pull on his boots, Markis was surely barefoot; the rippling sound of cloth stirred by the wind. Moreover, there was an awareness of the

man himself. The idea of running flittered through Uly's mind, but he didn't want others to see him running while the prince gave chase. Neither of them would ever live down the teasing. Fine, let Markis snap questions into his face. Uly managed to turn his head slightly to catch sight of the man who wore a long black cloak that fluttered around him, briefly exposing paler glimpses of flesh. The sight made Uly's heart leap into his throat and then stutter, as the feeling fell back to his chest. It made him hesitate, and before he could turn fully around or cry out, Markis came up behind him and wrapped warm, strong arms around his body. The move pinned his arms, trapped his throat. A hand over his mouth stifled his soft cry and tilted back his head. Clouds chose that moment to cover the moon, and Uly looked up into a deep grey sky broken only by black fluttering shapes. Bats flew, swooped, and dived about the sky catching nocturnal insects.

Uly stiffened, his limbs going rigid in contrast to his flaccid cock. A chill crept over and up through his body, and the cause wasn't the power that Markis possessed. The feeling was one of utter fear, and while some part of Uly recognised it, tried to accept it for what it was, another part reacted. Markis lifted him bodily, turned sharply around, and carried him back to the tent. The distance was short, but it seemed to take hours. With each step, part of him slipped away. The person he had once been eagerly filled the gaps. He was only a street urchin.

Black shadows carried on fluttering wings swooped overhead and rushed in from all sides of his mind. The cloak fluttered with movement and occasionally flapped around him. Each stroke against his skin made him want to cry out. The landscape shimmered away into dust and poorly constructed buildings made of wood and stone rose up from the depths of his memory. Light from a tavern drove black shadows up the walls of the alley, making black twisted man-shapes of impossible heights. A bat disturbed by the commotion swooped down from the eaves and Uly cried out, as it just missed his face. An arm tightened around his throat, drowning the shout.

Another man took hold of his legs and lifted him to carry him deeper into the dark space. He struggled then, though the hand over his mouth and nose stole his breath. He twisted, kicked, flailed, got a hand free...and gripped the sword at his side. Uly hesitated for just a fraction, lost, uncertain, knowing the weapon shouldn't have been there, but unable to relinquish it. He started to draw it free...

\* \* \* \* \*

The moment they reached the tent, Uly started to struggle in his arms. Markis might have believed the young man was just annoyed, but a sense of utter panic seemed to seep from Uly's very pores. The air was thick with it. He realised Uly's intent the same time he saw Ryanac's eyes go wide. Uly managed to free one of his hands and reached for his weapon. An instant later, the prince realised that the way he held Uly, he would never manage to stop him in time. Ryanac reacted by throwing his body across the small distance,

falling, skidding on his knees. That surely hurt, had to have taken skin. The guard paid it no mind, but gripped Uly's wrist hard, bending the arm at an awkward angle. Markis could only hope that Ryanac paid attention to his strength. He didn't want Uly to suffer a broken arm.

A soft curse hissed out through Ryanac's lips but he jerked the blade free. As he did, Markis's strength gave out and he released the struggling body. To grab and carry a grown man was one thing. To hold on to him while panic gave him enhanced strength was another. Hoping Uly didn't have another weapon concealed on him, still Markis expected the younger man to turn and fight. He expected him to lash out with hands or words. He did neither. Markis stood and gaped while Uly scrambled away from them, literally crawling away on hands and knees. He scuttled under the board that served for a table and crouched there, holding his right wrist with his left hand. He rocked, eyes wide, staring at the ground. Worse were the little breathy noises that escaped his mouth.

Aware of movement at his side, Markis looked down to see Ryanac glance up at him and then looked back to Uly. Even at a time like this, Ryanac was a handsome specimen on his knees, but those knees were grazed and blood ran from a small cut on the outside of his forearm -- a slice from the blade. Markis took a step forward and Uly let out a small sound not unlike a scream. The cry froze Markis in his tracks.

Ryanac rose to his feet. He pressed his fingers over the cut. Although it didn't look serious, it surely hurt. Markis moved away and opened a nearby box. He took out supplies to take care of the cut. Whatever ailed Uly right this minute, it didn't look as if he wanted anyone near him, and Markis wasn't about to stand there while Ryanac shed blood. For once, he received no protest over his fussing. He cleaned Ryanac's wound and wrapped a linen bandage around it. The cut didn't need stitches. As he turned, Uly made another small sound. Ryanac's face tightened.

"I don't think he likes your cloak," he whispered.

Puzzled, Markis wasn't about to argue. He reached up for the fastening at his neck and let Ryanac take it from his back. Though they tried to hide the movement as much as possible, each rustle of the fabric tore small mewling noises from Uly's lips. Feeling slightly foolish but unsure why, Markis took a few, slow steps forward. Although Uly tensed, he didn't seem as panicked. Keeping his movements slow and calm, Markis knelt on the ground and sat back on his heels, resting his hands against his thighs so that Uly could see he was unarmed.

"Uly." He spoke just as slowly, just as calmly as he had moved. "It's Markis. Uly, look at me. Come back to me."

It didn't look as if Uly would respond. Those cool grey eyes darted back and forth. Finally, Uly's gaze shifted a little towards him. His gaze darted away just as quickly, but Markis was patient. He could wait. A slight frown darkened Uly's face, then a flush that could only be embarrassment reddened his skin. That skin had looked pale with terror. Markis recognised fear when he saw it. What he needed to know was what had happened to

Uly to make him so afraid. Certainly, he could think of nothing in the time they had spent together.

Markis wanted to laugh aloud. He was kidding himself. He had almost killed Uly twice. It wasn't him, of course. That was the comet out of control, but he didn't like to use that as an excuse. Had Uly believed he was going to hurt him like that again? Markis had believed they were past that worry, but maybe it lingered in Uly's mind. Recognition finally seeped back into those luminous eyes. Uly swallowed.

Slowly lifting one hand, Markis held it out toward him. "Come out, Uly. No one's going to hurt you."

That gaze flickered behind him to Ryanac, then back again. The young man didn't reach for his hand. Instead, tears ran from those pale eyes to the end of his nose to drip onto the ground. He started to shake. Easing forward, Markis half-crawled under the makeshift table and carefully drew Uly into his arms. He made no sudden moves, made no attempt to hold on. He simply let Uly spill into his arms and let the younger man rest there. The sound of Uly's quiet sobs filled the tent while Markis stroked his hair.

## Chapter Ten

Uly stepped out into bright sunlight. Although the sun had only just risen in the east, it looked as though the day would prove fine and clear. It would also be hot. Uly turned his gaze toward the cliff face ahead. Already they could make out the two individual crags. Markis had explained its common name of “the split” was the start of a long and winding passage. It would be sheltered and cool within its confines. Just as well that it would only take a few hours to reach it, and an early start meant they would arrive before the sun sat fully high in the sky. Alas, the early start meant that none of them managed much sleep.

Uly looked across now and saw Ryanac watching him. He had woken once in the night to discover Ryanac stroking his brow, whispering quietly that it was just a bad dream. Apparently, he had been restless. He managed little sleep. It felt as if there might be dark circles under his eyes. Even now, he was aware he hunched, and from the way Ryanac narrowed his gaze, it looked as though the big man disapproved. Uly hadn't held himself this way since he came to them over a year ago. He had stopped walking hunched just a few weeks after they took him from the street.

Bile touched the back of his throat. Ryanac now looked angry. Uly's gaze flickered to where Ryanac's hands worked on fastening items to his horse's saddle and then up to his face. Ryanac refused even to blink. The big man had taken his blade last night and had no intention of returning it until he was satisfied Uly could be trusted not to hurt Markis by intent or accident. Not even the comet was going to make him hand back the weapon, and Uly couldn't blame him. He would have done the same thing.

\* \* \* \* \*



They entered the split around midday. At once, Markis cantered up to him. The man's presence burnt as a flame at his side so that it almost felt as though Markis called on the comet. He hadn't. What Uly felt was purely the presence of the man.

Staring straight ahead, Uly pushed the thought of Markis away. No doubt, the prince would speak when he wanted. In the meantime, as a distraction, Uly turned his thoughts to the long passage they would travel through for the next two days. He had asked Markis how safe was the passage. To him, it seemed dangerous. Markis told him the cliffs were next to impossible to climb, and that while there was some risk of an enemy boxing them in at either end, one end led out into Swithin territory. On the other side, the desert became an oasis. Uly muttered that he had only ever known mud, and what he knew of the desert was dry and gritty. Markis promised he would like what lay on the other side of those cliffs, and he had looked forward to it. Now, he couldn't seem to work up enough enthusiasm for anything. The split proved as cool as Markis said, however, and as they left the heat of the desert behind, Uly uttered a soft sigh.

"Do you want to tell me what happened last night?"

The question was fair but he shook his head, lowering his gaze. He could feel Markis's gaze burning into the side of his face but he wouldn't look.

"Was it me? Did I frighten you?"

What could he say? That was at least partly true. "Yes," he mumbled, unwilling to elaborate. He became aware of Markis nodding and peered across. A dark scowl took up residence in that usually compassionate face. He didn't like it, but didn't seem able to do anything about it. He wanted to tell Markis what frightened him. He just couldn't. Even paying it any mind brought black shadows fluttering at the periphery of his vision. He closed his eyes, willing them away. All that lay in the past. Bury it. Bury it deep.

"I am sorry."

Uly frowned, unsure why Markis apologised.

"You were clearly angry with me and I wanted to ask why. I didn't want to confront you with the guards looking on. I just wanted you back in the tent." Markis glanced at him. "Why were you so angry to find me and Ryanac alone like that?"

The effort to speak was alarming. "I told you."

"No." Markis shook his head. "We left ourselves vulnerable, and you were right to chastise us for that. My only excuse is that I didn't realise how vulnerable we would be. I had never done that before. Whether I would have been aware of danger, I can't tell. Next time, I will make sure we have someone on guard, perhaps even you."

Markis smiled, but Uly failed to return the gesture. Sure. He would guard the two men, if Ryanac ever gave him back his sword.

"There's something else troubling you, though."

Something else, several other things, in fact, but Uly believed he knew what Markis referred to. "Why Ryanac?" he asked quietly. "Why do that with him?"

Consideration flashed over Markis's face. "Did you understand what we were doing?"

"Yes," Uly answered, then added, "No. I'm not sure, but I can read. I understood the idea. I just..."

"Find it difficult to accept?" Markis finished for him. Uly nodded. "Uly, are you jealous?"

The question took him by surprise, then he realised the truth of it and was further surprised that Markis noticed it so easily. "I know I shouldn't be."

"No, you shouldn't." Weariness existed in the prince's voice. There were times when Markis sounded tired from the comet, but never before had he sounded this exasperated. The prince stared ahead, his lips compressed in a tight line. Eventually, he licked his lips and swallowed. Uly's gaze dropped to the exposed line of Markis's throat. He wanted to kiss it, and yet right now he didn't think he wanted anyone to touch him, and how could he touch the prince without being touched in return? He wasn't even sure why he wanted to kiss the man there so badly. Was that love or was it lust? Sometimes, he wasn't sure what he felt. All he knew right now was his desire to trail his lips along the man's throat. He was sure Markis would allow it, would even enjoy it. There seemed to be something symbolic about someone offering you their throat, but he wasn't sure he completely understood it.

"Uly, what I attempted to do last night I had never done before. I had no idea if I even could. I could only learn to do this thing in the trying, and yet I have shared a moment with Ryanac before, one where I felt the urge to send a little of the power of the comet into him. What we...shared...proved to be as intimate as I expected, and yet even I was unprepared."

That dark gaze moved in his direction. "Do you realise how short a time we've spent together as lovers?"

The abrupt change of subject startled Uly. The dark penetrating gaze demanded he consider the question seriously.

"Think on it," Markis told him.

They had spent one night together before their journey to the Azu plains. Once there, he and Markis shared another intimate evening. The next day they rescued Tressa and became a quartet. He and Markis had spent that night together, but they hadn't been alone. It seemed a pitiful amount of time, considering how fond he had grown of Markis.

*Fond? Don't you mean love?* Uly bit at his lower lip. "I'm not oblivious to that."

"Then you find me with Ryanac."

A prickling sensation at the back of his eyes quickly changed to a stinging irritation. He stared ahead. He would not cry.

"Ryanac and I entered each other's minds last night. For a time we lived almost as if we were one person. Some of it proved erratic, and I'm certain it was my fault. As I say, I had

never done this before. Do you think I would take that chance with you? Do you think I would ask to invade your mind like that, having had you in my life for so short a time? It's been over a year, but you've only been Samir to me for a few days. I would not ask such an intimate thing of anyone."

"Yet you asked Ryanac?" Uly saw the sense of Markis's argument. However, he could not completely chase the pain of it aside. "You asked me to steal the book so you could do this with him."

"No. To begin with, I did not *ask* Ryanac. I suggested it to him. It may be subtle, but there's a difference. This was something we both wanted, but that he probably needed more than I did."

Uly frowned. He still found it strange to think of Ryanac as needing something from anybody, even though that very thing had occurred to him, too.

"I have known him almost my entire life. The only people I have known longer, or as long, are the members of my family or his. This is why we could do this thing. That has nothing to do with love or the level of trust, except in that it has grown to be enough over time. Time is something you and I have ahead of us, not behind."

"You would put a person so dear to you at risk?" From the look on Markis's face, Uly expected the other man to sigh.

"The risk was minimal. I would not have done it at all if I were not sure the chances were good I could withdraw from his mind without damaging either of us. The experience was not entirely pleasant, however, and I knew I could rely on Ryanac's strength and personal experience of life to help him cope with it. That is also something you will gain with time."

"I've not exactly had it easy."

"I never said you did." Despite the conciliatory tone, a hint of impatience crept into Shavar's voice. "Nevertheless, you do not possess Ryanac's personal strength. As to your other question, I did not ask you to steal the book so I could do this. I didn't even know what the book contained. I just knew that Stargazer wanted to keep it from me, and that was good enough of a reason for me to want to see it."

Despite everything, that brought a smile to his lips. Markis saw it and smiled back. "I am glad of your jealousy."

Uly jerked in surprise and stared at the prince.

"It means, despite any doubts you have, you do feel something." Those dark eyes studied him intently. "You think me a fool? You're still not sure about us, are you?"

Uly's voice emerged, quiet and small. "I want to be." It took him a moment and he glanced away while he gathered his thoughts, but then he looked back to the prince, having decided to speak the truth. "I've never had reason to trust anyone. You, Ryanac, I want to trust you, though."

Markis nodded. "You have feelings for me, but you don't entirely trust them. You don't even entirely trust what I feel for you. You believe it, but you fear it, even if you have no need. Words alone cannot change that for you. We need time, Uly, and I am sorry that there will be days and nights when duty takes me from you. Consider how different your life is now to a year ago, and look forward to a time when we can look back."

"What do you expect us to see?"

"I expect us to feel content and sated and to look back at the long road that took us there." Markis turned his gaze ahead. "Much like this one, in some ways, with its many twists and turns. I hope, though, that it proves more interesting than this."

The towering, reddish rock walls soared over their heads. The dark sand snaked out into the distance front and back. The only relief here was a respite from the heat. The rest of it was undeniably bland.

"My people have a curse," Uly said. He waited for Markis to look at him. "May your years be interesting."

It took a moment for the smile to break out on Markis's face, and then he laughed. Uly could only laugh with him. Some of the fatigue brought on by last night left him. Perhaps it was only a lapse. Perhaps the past truly lay on the road at his back. The future held promise, and it had Markis in it. As ambiguous as his feelings were, Uly had faith in him. Markis was a good man.

When Markis reached out a hand to run his fingers down the side of his face, Uly was grateful for it. He struggled to recall his fear and even felt foolish for it.

"Tonight we all get a better night's sleep," Markis said, his hand dropping to his own thigh. "You and I will spend it alone, just the two of us."

That Markis would set time aside for him came as no surprise. That he did so, so easily...

"What about Ryanac?"

"I rather think he already knows. We can finish what we started another time, though you should know..." Markis hesitated. Uly gave him a questioning look. "You could learn a lot, you know, from watching Ryanac and me make love." He winked as he said it.

Something else occurred to Uly and he blinked, surprised and a little disgusted that he had forgotten her. "What about Tressa, and why isn't she riding today?" He hadn't even seen her this morning. It surprised him to hear that she rode in the carriage ahead.

A dark look settled on Markis's face. "She is being the Azulite princess she claimed she never wanted to be." No doubt seeing Uly's frown, Markis rolled his eyes. "She's not feeling well, but she's fine. She bleeds."

It took Uly a moment to understand, but when he did, he didn't know whether to blush or to frown harder. Markis chuckled softly.

"I have sympathy with her feeling unwell, but we have ways to alleviate that. Tressa, alas, will have none of it. She believes this is part of what a woman has to endure. In Swithin eyes, there is no 'has to' about it. When we get to the city, if she holds to these backward ways she and I will have words. I allowed her the carriage because of the pain but not, as she believes, because a woman should hide her face. I tried to talk with her this morning and she wouldn't listen. I didn't have the time or the inclination to argue, but when we set up camp tonight, I intend we will speak. Don't be surprised if you hear shouting and screaming coming from the large tent."

"That's..." He'd been about to say crazy. It didn't seem right to call a princess crazy, although he had once referred to Markis's father, the king, that way. Markis's dark eyes shifted towards him in question so Uly continued. "Where I come from, we don't usually talk about such things, but women don't hide themselves away. Most of the time, they're scavenging for food like the rest of us. A few try to make a home."

"The men don't?"

Markis sounded neither surprised nor displeased. Possibly, he was merely curious.

"Not so much."

A small sigh came from the prince as he lowered his gaze. Reaching out, Shavar patted his horse's neck. "Part of me wishes you would stop referring to yourself as one of your race, and yet I know to some such things can be important."

The remark certainly gave Uly reason to think. His reply came almost too quickly. "I don't consider myself Simeon." They looked at one another. "I don't," he insisted. "Not really. I don't know that I ever did. I just tried to stay alive, keep out of trouble. Most of the time, I succeeded. I was lucky that way. Hebe always said I had luck. She said either it would last all my life, or if it ran out, she didn't want to be around when it did." Hebe had been the closest thing to a friend on the street in recent years.

"So, my little thief, you thought your luck ran out the night I grabbed your wrist." A dark twinkle in the eyes gave the prince away. Heat and desire existed in their depths.

Yes, he had believed he was going to die the night Markis captured him. As a thief, Uly tried to take the purse of a strange man in open parkland. Everything about Markis had been strange. The park was strange -- land set aside for pleasure by the Swithin who had conquered the Simeon race over a decade ago. The Swithin brought cultivation to the land, housing, sewers, and food. Uly found it difficult to resent a conquering race that improved your way of life and paid you for work rather than enslaved you. Still, he should have known better than to steal from a man sitting so calmly in open parkland. Strange that, to see a man sitting unperturbed as dusk settled across the land. Odd was the man's clothing. Peculiar was the fact that he had known of Uly's approach, that he captured him and had Ryanac, his guard, take Uly into custody. Strange that Markis fed him, gave him a bed, and asked nothing in return. It was perplexing that a Swithin noble would set out to educate a street thief, and strange that once Uly made his desire known, the man still hadn't taken advantage of him.

Only later did Uly learn that duty dictated that Markis remain celibate while he learned to control the comet. Ryanac had finally argued a better case than the seers had. Either that, or desire won out over obligation.

*My little thief.* Markis often called him that and it brought a smile to Uly's lips. He wanted to ask if he was still Shavar's thief, but he didn't have to voice the words. Deep inside where it mattered, he knew he always would be.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Out! Out! Get out!"

Assaulted by the screaming, Markis almost didn't realise the old maid's intent as she came running at him. Only the strangled sound Idelle made gave her away. Her hands were set into claws as though to tear his face and he caught her by the wrists just in time. Still, she fought him. He could break a wrist to make her stop, but he didn't want to do that.

"Tell her to touch Shavar without invitation is to seek death." The threat was true to the law that anyone who touched him without request could face execution. Idelle and Tressa didn't have to know he had no intention of carrying out the threat. He glared at Tressa's wide eyes as she took a step back. The look was one of pure shock. He glared; she stared. As Idelle continued to struggle, Markis narrowed his gaze. He half-wished he possessed full control of the comet so he could put the fear of the stars into her. That thought was petty and childish, and he didn't like having it. However, if it came to breaking one of her wrists, or both, or having his eyes clawed out, he knew which one he would opt for. Apparently, so did Tressa. She reached out and tugged on her maid's sleeve.

"Stop. Please stop. I do not want you hurt over this."

The struggles eased, but her maid still seemed uncertain. Loyalty for one she had served for many years shone through the anger. Markis admired the sentiment, but he didn't intend to give up his sight for it. Finally, she stepped back, but he let go of her slowly until he could be certain she wouldn't launch herself at him again. The woman was like a wild arrow.

"You may leave. We will talk," Tressa said.

"She can stay," Markis said. "If she's to continue to serve you, she can hear this too." Tressa's dark eyes looked up to his face. A spark of anger flared amidst all the dismay. Good. He liked her anger, but only when she used it in the right way. Normally pale, tonight Tressa looked positively ill. Did all Azulite women suffer the bleed this way? Markis kept his voice low.

"There is no need for this. You do not have to hide yourself away. You have no need to suffer like this."

Tressa lowered her gaze, causing Markis to grit his teeth. He would rather she was spitting in his face. Where was the woman with fire in her blood? He would not have

married a woman so weak-willed, and he had married Tressa with all the will in the world. The other day she tried to manipulate him and, while it annoyed him to the comet and back, he preferred that to this. Since the bleed, she seemed to be apologising for her very existence.

"You have no say in whether I should suffer."

"Why not? Isn't it a man who said you should?" A small crease of puzzlement tightened her brow, but she kept her gaze on the floor. "Tressa." He took a step forward and a small gasp left her lips. Forcing himself to stop, to speak to his wife from a few paces off no matter how foolish that was, Markis said, "You are allowing your father to win."

That got her attention. Her head shot up and those dark, bright eyes glared at him.

"A man, your father, put a chastity belt on you. He would like to have dictated whom you wed. He or your husband would have dictated whether you could have sex. You fought to be free of all this. You hope our union will change things for your race, make life better and a more open place in which women can live happily, freely. Yet you stand here in front of me and tell me that men of your race tell you to hide your face."

A small cry escaped her lips. Her gaze roamed and she turned first one way and then another as though searching for a way to run away from him. Her maid sat down on a nearby chair, a hand to her chest and one to her head, as if she were going to faint. Tressa clutched at her skirts.

"Look at me."

She shook her head. "It is shameful."

"Why?"

"It is...messy."

Laughter bubbled up inside him and he quickly swallowed it down. "What part of life isn't?" He took another step. Tressa shook, possibly from the effort of standing there and letting him advance. When he stood close enough, he ran the tip of a finger down the side of her face to her lips, tracing them. "Some messy things are extremely pleasant."

Her whimper took him by surprise, but still he reacted quickly enough to take hold of her by the arm as she tried to turn away. Markis lost patience, but might not have done so if he had thought his argument might win out in the end. The look in her eye told him this argument might continue for months to come, and he certainly didn't have the patience for that. He would take the more direct approach. A good way to teach Tressa was to shock her.

Holding her in the grip of his left hand, he pulled a dagger from his belt. Her eyes went wide, her lips parted, and she let out a small gasp as it passed before her eyes, but she had no reason to be afraid. Markis made a small nick in his skin, just enough so a small amount of blood oozed out of the wound. He slipped the dagger back into its sheath, and then gripped her with his right hand so he would have the left free. A thin line of blood ran down the side of his hand just below his left thumb where he had broken the skin. He held it up in front of

her face until her gaze took it in. Then he wiped it against the right side of her face leaving a bloody streak.

She cried out and twisted in his embrace, but now he used both hands to grip her, one on each arm. Markis gave her a small shake. "It's natural. It's blood. We're born covered in blood and too many of us go out covered in it. It gives life, and it takes it." He gave her another shake until she looked into his eyes. He lowered his voice. "Together we can create life," he told her. "There's no shame in that. There's no shame in not wanting to either, or in waiting until the time is right, or you've met the right person." He pressed their foreheads together. "The other day you asked me if I thought the Azulites were just the silliest things." He pulled back. "Right now, I would have to agree with that sentiment. Stop being silly, Tressa. Be a woman, be a princess, be my queen.

"By the way" -- he leaned into her until his lips whispered against her ear -- "by the time we reach the city, you'll no longer bleed and I plan to fuck you to the stars and back. There's only one reason I want to hear you screaming out my name. I'll fuck you until you realise that you have everything you ever dreamed of within reach. All you have to do is take it."

He could have told her that the Swithin thought nothing of having sex during such a time as this, but she felt unwell, and the shock alone might prove too much for her just now. If she wanted what she considered a last vestige of dignity, no matter how silly, he would not be the one to take it from her. He stepped away, bringing the small injury to his lips and licking away the blood on his hand. Already the blood clotted to seal the small cut. Her gaze flickered to his mouth and then back to his eyes. The skin around her eyes was tight with pain, but the light of his promise danced in them.



## Chapter Eleven

Uly looked as if he were sleeping when Markis entered the smaller tent. Strange that Tressa somehow managed to turf the men out of the large tent. There was one of her and three of them. Shouldn't it have been the other way around? Markis sighed equally at the thought as at the sight of Uly lying there, clearly naked under the sheet, his head turned to the right, his right arm flung up and out carelessly, his left lying across his stomach where the edge of the sheet gave way to exposed flesh. His pale hair spilled over the pillow. A sudden, almost disabling jolt of desire shot through Markis, but the trouble was, if Uly were truly sleeping, then Markis didn't have the heart to wake him.

As though he were aware of the thought, Uly opened his eyes and turned his head at the same time. Those grey eyes always seemed to contain an inner light. Uly blinked a few times, then his gaze focused. Not a deep sleep, then.

"Please tell me you've eaten something," Markis said.

"Little bit. I needed to lie down."

Crouching over him, Markis placed a kiss on that unlined forehead. "Close your eyes and rest. I need to wash." Although there were enough watering holes to sustain them along the way, that did not mean they were casual about the use of water. Still, they considered it impolite to come to a lover without washing first, especially when one had spent the vast majority of the day on a horse. Markis longed for a bath, but all he would get this night was a bowl of water.

When he smelt as sweetly clean as Uly, he turned his attention back to the bed. His wet skin made him more aware of the lower temperature. It was not what one could call cold, but the evening air sent a shiver across his flesh as it caressed still moist skin. A light murmur left Uly's lips as Markis slipped onto the bed. "Is my little thief truly sleeping?" Markis asked, and received the reward of a slowly broadening grin. Running fingers lightly

along the line of Uly's neck to his clavicle made the younger man squirm and practically giggle. Hearing this released something tight inside Markis he hadn't known existed. He followed the path of his fingers with kisses.

Uly turned into him, a soft sound escaping his lips. The sound was not quite a gasp or a sigh. Markis might have called it just an increase in Uly's breathing if no passion existed in it. Unable to help it, Markis kissed Uly full on the lips. The resistance was immediate yet slight, then Uly melted into him as he always did. Hands fluttered against his arms, uncertain in the movement. Mentally, Markis cursed. Apparently, it would take more than mere words to convince Uly that he could touch him whenever and wherever he wanted. He didn't know if the young man's reluctance was due to inexperience or because he still feared the part of Markis that was Shavar. He had asked Ryanac this and the big man had laughed, telling him it was probably both.

Uly had run hands over his body the other night, but only because Markis told him to do it. A slow seduction was fine in the beginning -- Markis even enjoyed it -- but it would soon begin to annoy him. The only thing Uly seemed truly capable of returning was a kiss, his tongue pushing up, exploring, searching, almost pleading for Markis's tongue to dance with his. As Markis moved closer, his hair fell forward, and he was glad he'd taken the time to let it out of the braid as Uly's hands clawed up through it. A spark of surprise warmed to a low, delighted fire as, finally, Uly touched him without needing an order or permission. Fine, it might only be his hair, but even that set Markis's scalp tingling in response. Pulling back slightly, but not so much the hands could break contact, Markis stared down into Uly's eyes. The rewards this night kept coming as their gazes met and held for a few beats. All the while, those long delicate fingers combed through his hair finally to settle over his shoulders. With a gentle, almost impossible-to-feel tug, Uly drew him down for another kiss. The gesture tore a moan from Markis's throat. Yes, by the comet, this was how it should be.

Some part of Markis urged him to take things slow, but this felt so right, so good, and Uly was so delicious, writhing and rubbing against him. Their skin was cool, warm, hot, soft, and hard by various degrees, depending where they met, where they slapped skin against skin. Rolling onto his back, Markis took Uly with him, cradling that all too innocent face in his hands, his fingers digging into Uly's scalp, pale-blond tresses falling over the backs of his hands, sending him wild with the light tickling sensation of it. He took possession of Uly's mouth, teasing his lips apart with a lick, although they never required much coaxing. Uly loved his kisses.

Fire roared through him but, for once, it wasn't the heat of the comet. Most of the time, the comet brought ice, but sometimes it brought heat. This heat Markis recognised as a swiftly growing need, one that would travel up through his body to break out over his skin until it seemed every particle of his being would have only one definite focus. His mind would shut down. Hunger and pain would be secondary. The only thing on his mind would be release of the kind that required hard, heavy pumping force into somewhere tight.

Pausing for air, saliva flooded his mouth together with the urge to bite. Markis wanted to sink his teeth into the bare line of shoulder so close to his face, but he couldn't. That skin looked too pale, too delicate and tender. If this had been Ryanac, he could have, *would* have bit. He would have left a mark, maybe even drawn blood, and Ryanac would have laughed and worn the damage gleefully. It was too soon in their relationship for Markis to bite this sweet, tender morsel so savagely. He turned the need of his mouth into another kiss, making the plunge demanding and almost violent.

Nails raked his arms and Markis growled from the wonderful pain of it. If he couldn't bite, he needed to be bitten, sucked, and devoured. Pulling back, he spoke with his lips pressed against Uly's mouth. "By the comet, I need you. I need you to suck me. Take me in your mouth, Uly. I need to feel your lips around me." As he spoke, he sat up, gathering Uly to him. The younger man's eyes looked wide and glossy. Reaching between them, Markis encircled his cock with his own fingers, while keeping one hand on the back of Uly's head. He kissed him again, at the same time stroking his own member to full attention.

Coming off Uly's mouth, Markis planted kisses up the side of Uly's face, up to his eyes, kissing those closed eyelids, and finally moving to the younger man's brow. From between Uly's eyes, Markis glided his lips up over his forehead and into the hair, tongue flicking through the strands to tease Uly's scalp. All the while, the force of his hand tipped Uly's head downward towards his straining cock. His grip tightened and forced Uly's head down. The lightest touch of warm, soft lips threatened to drive Markis to the edge of insanity. Uly's lips parted tentatively, and some part of Markis's consciousness swam up, telling him this was too urgent. Words lay silent on his tongue, words that would comfort Uly, guide him. White, cold horror roiled in as Markis at once realised this was too forceful. He tried to release the hard, unrelenting, gripping force of his hand on the back of Uly's neck too late. Uly's body tightened and tensed in all the wrong ways and tore out of his hands. A screaming, strangled cry poured from Uly's lips as the younger man scrambled away from him.

Coming up onto his knees, Markis reached out. Uly slapped the hand away from him and rolled, slithered, crawled as far away from Markis as the small area would allow. "Don't touch me! Just keep the fuck away from me!"

Markis feared to see that wild haunted look in Uly's eyes that had been present the night Uly first came into his life. What he saw instead was equally frightening. There was anger, disgust, and something close to hatred. Markis's erection shrivelled and died. It felt rather like his heart might, too. Uly knelt, huddled in the corner, glaring at him. *What have I done? What in the stars is going on?*

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm sorry." The words were inadequate. His hand lifted and Uly cringed from it. Markis let his hand drop, though it took all he had to do so. He wanted to go to Uly, to comfort him. That was only natural.

"What by the comet is going on in here?" A dark presence entered the tent and Markis stared up at Ryanac almost blindly. Vague awareness of the man tugged at his senses. Ryanac's concerned face finally swam into focus. Markis tried to explain. What exact words he used escaped him. He was only aware the sentences were mumbled, broken. He put the point across, apparently, when Ryanac nodded, but that still left his Samir shivering naked by one corner of the pallet. Markis was certain the shivering had nothing to do with the cooler air. He tensed to move towards Uly, and Ryanac nudged Markis with a still-booted foot.

"Give him a minute. Leave him be."

He wanted to argue, but if he did, what would he be doing it for? For Uly's sake, or his own? Ryanac seemed to read this in his face.

"You want to comfort him to make yourself feel good. That's why most of us ask for forgiveness."

Despite how disgusted and annoyed he was with himself, Markis growled in anger. Ryanac's eyes flashed.

"That's better," he said, and Markis closed his eyes and counted to ten.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Why did you have clean teeth?"

The sudden question tightened Uly's face in puzzlement. It brought a scowl to Markis's face but he kept silent, waiting to see where the big man was going with this. Ryanac ignored both of them and slowly began to rid himself of the irritating armour. Usually, Markis would have risen to help him. He daren't move. He had eyes only for Uly.

The younger man hugged his pale, exposed flesh, though he did nothing to cover himself. His modesty came from the way he cowered.

Ryanac dropped the heaviest part of his gear to one side. "Uly. When you came to us, you had clean teeth. You've always kept them clean. If juberry leaves suddenly died off from disease, I think you would have a fit." Juberry leaves were a great find. Chewing them made teeth smooth and white, and they left a pleasant taste. The guard pulled off one boot and then the other. "A young man like you could have earned an easy living with such clean teeth."

The reaction to his words was immediate. Uly flinched and then cringed. Markis started, rising a little in anger, unhappy that Ryanac would use what he had just told him in such a manner. Ryanac held up a hand without looking at him, begging for silence. Markis struggled to contain his temper, but waited. Ryanac continued to undress as he talked.

"Even now, when you smile you keep your mouth closed. You don't walk hunched, but you do tug on your lower lip. Mostly you used to do this by drawing the lip back into your mouth and pressing your lips together. An affectation, I believe, that began as a way to keep

your mouth tightly closed so you wouldn't show your teeth by accident. Lately, you don't hold your mouth so tight anymore." While Ryanac spoke, the young man cowered down even more. His head hunched down into his right shoulder. He closed his eyes so tightly, the gesture screwed up his face. "I could understand your distaste for earning a living that way, but what I don't understand is why you bothered to have clean teeth at all."

Ryanac stood now in breeches and tunic. He drew the tunic off over his head. Markis's gaze followed the movement in disapproval, though he didn't really believe Ryanac intended touching Uly tonight. "Why?" the guard asked again, his voice hard and harsh. "Why keep your teeth clean? You must have known men would have liked to use your mouth if they knew you had clean teeth."

"They didn't have the right." The reply came so quietly, if they hadn't been waiting for it, it would probably have gone unnoticed.

"What?"

"They didn't have the right!" The shout rang out, as Uly's eyes opened and blazed. A hard, cold light of anger burned in them. Ryanac would have said *good* and Markis would have agreed with him. Anger was always better than fear. When Uly spoke next, his voice was quieter, but it still contained that firmness -- determination, belief, certainty; good things all. "They didn't have the right to take that from me. They didn't have the right to take everything. To dictate how and what I should be." He looked away then, much to Markis's disappointment, but Ryanac wasn't about to let Uly retreat into his protective shell again.

"Tell him," Ryanac said. "Tell him what happened." Those grey eyes flickered up and then between the two men. Pain returned to Uly's face.

"I can't. I want to, but I can't." A plea existed in there somewhere, along with apology. "I pushed it aside."

"What brought it back? When and why?"

The question brought forth a horrified look directed solely at the prince. "Last night when Markis grabbed me from behind. Earlier, Antal grabbed me about the throat when teaching me how to fight. I didn't like it, but shook it off. Then last night..." Uly shook his head, clearly unable to continue.

Markis didn't know what to say and feared to speak. If he tried to reassure Uly everything would be all right, it would be in guilt and apology, and that wasn't what their street thief needed right now. However, if he let the subject lie, Uly would push whatever ailed him to the back of his mind, and it would stay there and fester like sickness. Perhaps honesty was best.

"Would you show him?" Ryanac asked, before Markis managed to speak.

Markis looked up at him, confused, then said, "No. You can't mean..."

Ryanac ignored the comment and spoke right over him. His gaze was all for Uly, whose look of puzzlement quickly turned to one of consideration. "Sometimes when bad things happen, our mind shuts them out, usually because they are too much for us to cope with at the time. Sometimes, if we never face what happened, it grows inside of us like a disease. It will rot you from the inside; eat away at you. To share it with someone isn't shame. Often, it can draw the darkness out."

"You mean I could be free of it by facing it?"

Ryanac apparently couldn't hide the smile that tugged at his lips. Apparently, the big man understood very well what Markis saw in Uly, before Shavar had even seen it himself. "Something like that, yes." Ryanac only spoke the truth, and that fact put an end to Markis's argument. He didn't like this, but he couldn't argue with the concept.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do we have to be naked?"

"Bare skin helps. It's a natural contact." Markis said the words easily enough, but he avoided Uly's gaze. "Cover yourself with the sheet, if you like."

For a moment, it looked as though Uly considered doing so, but then he just sat there. They couldn't sit as intimately as two, and right now that was the last thing Uly probably needed, but the three of them formed a triangle, sitting cross-legged, knees and hands touching.

"Why the three of us?" A small tremor in his voice betrayed Uly's anxiety.

"Because for you this will be intense and unpleasant," Ryanac said. "The chances are it's going to affect Markis in a similar fashion. He cares for you, so he can hardly remain unaffected. It takes one of us to wish us out. I'll pull you both out, if I have to."

"I agree with him," Markis added and, after a moment, Uly nodded his agreement.

Before he began, the young man cast an inquisitive glance at the guard. "You don't care for me?"

Ryanac smirked. "My feelings have nothing to do with it. I will be able to maintain a distance. I've taught you that in battle." Understanding slowly crept over Uly's face. This was something one learned from experience, but Markis was aware that Ryanac had done his best to make Uly understand that while one fought, you kept your distance from what went on around you. The best warriors contained a calm, steady centre. It enabled them to draw it around them like a shield. Stillness settled about you even though outside movement was furious. In many ways, Markis likened it to what he did with the comet. What Markis needed to do was let the power settle around him and maintain it. He understood the concept, and now he faced the sudden enlightenment that it could help him. His duty had not only kept him celibate, it had kept him inexperienced. It was one thing to know how to fight; quite another to be in the midst of a battlefield where you witnessed your companions

fighting and dying, yet fought on, swallowing the grief, suppressing it until you could cry later. Shavar was too precious to risk in direct battle, and besides, Markis had been too busy trying to learn the ways of the bloody comet. It made him want to grind his teeth to think he could have learnt much out in the field rather than tucked away overseeing diplomatic duties. Like grief, these were things to consider later, when the heat of the moment was over.

Ryanac gave him an almost imperceptible nod. Markis closed his eyes. The power stuttered. He just wasn't calm enough. He became aware of Ryanac stroking a thumb back and forth over the back of his hand. No doubt Ryanac mourned the fact that this time he wasn't close enough to grope him. The golden halo expanded, surrounding them. The now familiar circle of peace enveloped them, stroked against their skin.

"What is it, Uly?" Ryanac asked. The question made Markis frown. He wanted to see the expression on the young man's face, but he wasn't ready to open his eyes. Still, he could sense Uly's hesitation.

"Why didn't it feel like this the other day?"

"You mean calm instead of...painful? Because it has a different intent," Ryanac answered, and Markis said nothing. He just listened to them.

"When you...did this, did it hurt?"

"Not what you can call pain."

"It doesn't frighten you?"

"I never said that. What would frighten me more is if Markis were any other man. If the man wielding *this* much power as a weapon were anyone but Markis, I would call it obscene. There were times in our history when even pious men abused such privileges."

There was no time to acknowledge the compliment. The power flowed down Markis's hands into the other two men. Darkness consumed them and ate their flesh in its wake.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gold-coloured vaporous threads tied them together as they floated in deep black. For Ryanac, the dizziness this time proved faint and yet, on the end of that...

...vomit burned his throat.

*Chase it back. Ignore it. Send it away.* Ryanac sent the thought out with ease and Uly obeyed instantly. A strange kind of pleasure infused the guard and Uly gasped, the abyss suddenly full of his surprise. One thought burned brightly. *He's so often pleased with me.* Even without a physical form, Uly blushed.

*At least that stopped you from feeling sick.*

The blush deepened and Ryanac laughed. Here, that laughter rolled around, stroked its victims. All three men groaned.

As pleasant as this was...

WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS. THIS ISN'T FOR US TO INVADE ULY'S LIFE. IT'S FOR HIM TO SHOW US ONE MOMENT OF IT.

*He doesn't want to do this with me. He doesn't want to share the abyss.* The thought came from Uly, and referred to Markis. Uly hadn't been able to contain it. Bitter disappointment followed the thought and Markis corrected the error at once.

NOT NOW. NOT LIKE THIS. MAYBE ONE DAY WHEN WE ARE BOTH READY. ULY, I'M SHIELDING YOU. IT'S HARD WORK. TAKE US TO THE MEMORY.

*How?*

JUST...TAKE US.

A howl sounded out. The abyss rang with it.

*I don't want to be here.*

Both men were stunned by the intense fear radiating from Uly.

YOU HAVE TO DO THIS. YOU'RE NOT ALONE. WHATEVER IT IS, IT CAN'T HURT YOU THIS TIME AND WE'RE HERE.

Powerful arms wrapped around his body, trapping him. All three together struggled to move, and for two of them, the instant panic struck them as foolish. In Ryanac's case, no man alone had ever been able to hold him down, but suddenly he was aware he was short, young, and unable to fight. An arm trapped his throat, threatening to cut off his air. A hand over his mouth stifled his soft cry and tilted back his head. His body went rigid in fear, as if he were a hare trapped under the gaze of a wildcat.

Markis's mind sought his. Ryanac reached out to both the prince and the street thief. Street urchin, street thief, even back then picking pockets...and suddenly they were in Uly's memory. Turning their heads, they saw a much older boy, his grin and bright blue eyes flashing. Using his thumb, the young man flicked a coin into the air and caught it as it came down. At once, they knew the young man's name. Ty looked after Uly. Ty had lost family, a brother, and somehow, he and Uly, a boy half his age, had become friends of a sort. Uly's skills at thievery had something to do with it, but not all. They took care of each other when ill, shared food and shelter, always. The laughter faded from the blue eyes. The bright glitter in them turned cold, then dull.

A chill crept over and up through his body; it terrified, paralysed. Ryanac tried to fight the sensation, but this wasn't his fear and he had next to no control. Black shapes carried on fluttering wings swooped overhead and rushed in, bats, birds, and distorted shadows. A gust of wind stirred the black cloaks the men wore, adding to the illusion. Badly patched buildings soared upwards. People drank and cheered each other on in their drunkenness, on the other side of the wall, but none would come to their rescue even if they knew. Some might have even picked their pockets, would certainly rob their corpses.



"No. Don't hurt him. I'll do it. I'll do what you want. I can please all of you. He doesn't have to be a part of this."

A bat swooped down from the eaves, just missing Uly's face. The arm tightened around his throat, drowning out his answering cry.

"Hear that," a rough voice whispered into his ear. "Your friend wants to save you. If he believes he can do that, I'm almost sorry for him."

They were going to kill them anyway. No matter what Ty did, these men were going to do it to both of them, and then kill them. Uly kicked out at the man holding his legs. They carried him further, deeper into the dark alley. He couldn't breathe and his horror became another kind of panic. He twisted, kicked, flailed, and got a hand free...

"On your knees. Let's see what you can do with this. You bite and we cut the young one's throat."

They are going to do that anyway.

"No. Let him go." Ty sounded very decided.

"You're not in a good bargaining position." The man made "position" sound disgusting.

"Let him go and I won't bite any of you. If I do, you can cut my throat anyway. Let him go and I'll make sure you enjoy it."

"Oh, we'll enjoy it."

"I can hold my mouth slack, or I can suck. Your choice." There was firmness, *decidedness* in that young voice that belonged to a much older man. The knowledge that Ty had been twenty flashed into the abyss.

Suddenly, a much younger Uly found himself free, tossed to the ground. He flung himself at Ty, into the young man's arms. Those arms tightened so briefly, he might have imagined it, and then fingers began to pry him off, and they didn't belong to the men. Ty pushed Uly away, held his face so that they could only look into each other's eyes. "Go." Those blue eyes darkened in their intensity. "Run away as soon as you can."

He would run from this place and get help. Not many would get involved, but surely someone...

Ty stood, squaring his shoulders, allowing one of the men to draw his arms back to tie them behind him. They were taking Ty with them!

Uly knelt on rain-slick cobbles and stared up at his friend in despair. He had never felt so useless. Just before they slipped a gag into Ty's mouth, he said one more word. "Live." The men covered him with a cloak, drew the hood down over his face, and turned Ty towards the docks. Glancing at their feet as they walked away, Uly recognised the type of boots on their feet. They were common with sailors.

The knowledge, questions, rage, despair, and hopeless, helpless searching spread like a ferocious wind in the abyss. The belief that they had Ty aboard a ship brought ragged red streaks of lightning in its wake, until Markis hissed. Still, Uly had searched and waited until

one day he gave up hope. Now, ice rushed in. It turned cold; sharp, cracking sounds of breaking ice threatened to plunge them into pitiless depths.

*I want out of here. I want out!* On the end of Uly's cry came the question: *How could I have pushed that aside?* A shudder of revulsion, not due to the memory, but aimed at everything he and Markis shared, rattled like hail. It brought sharp, intensely cold pain spearing through their chests. The abyss grew dangerous. Uly's wish drew them part of the way out. Ryanac began to take them the rest of the way. They didn't so much rise out, but were flung.

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Groaning, Ryanac rolled onto his side and then onto his knees. The force had thrown him back. Uly lay curled into a ball, but even as Markis watched, the young man scrambled away. The prince remained seated but wondered if he might be sick. He closed his eyes and swayed. A light touch on his shoulder made him open them again. Ryanac studied his face, seemed satisfied, and then looked across to Uly.

"Uly, that wasn't sex. That was rape and murder."

"I know that." Tears rolled out endlessly from his eyes.

"Do you? Then what was that little display of disgust at the end?" Uly looked at him with pain-filled eyes as though asking why Ryanac would ask this question of all questions. He had dragged the sheet with him and held it close. "Do you think what you and Markis share has anything to do with that?"

The young man glanced at Markis, and then shook his head, no. He looked ashamed.

"Then what was that? There at the end." Markis raised a hand to stop him. Ryanac slapped it away. He sounded angry.

"It wasn't...it wasn't because of that."

Uly didn't have to explain. Markis had caught what it was and, no doubt, Ryanac understood it as well. Ryanac just stared at Uly, arms folded across his chest. Shaken, Markis could only sit there.

"I'm disgusted," the young man said at last.

"With me?" Finally, Markis joined the conversation.

Uly shook his head. "With me. For wanting. Liking. Needing...loving."

"You know I love you," Markis said softly. "You know I'm not going to force you to do anything. We can make love any way you want."

"No," Uly said, making Markis blink. "You deserve better than that," the young man went on to explain.

"Uly." Once more, Ryanac called to him. "When Ty told you to live, he didn't just mean for you to stay alive. It's not only Markis that deserves better. So do you."

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"Why, Ryanac? Why couldn't he do that with me? Why couldn't he talk to me about it? Why didn't he just say?"

They had dressed in breeches and tunics only. The light faded faster in the pass than it would outside of the cliffs. Best Uly stay in the tent. There were too many shadows out here. Markis and Ryanac had stepped out for some air.

"Do we really need to have this conversation?" his guard asked him.

"No. Yes." Markis ran a hand through his hair, dragging it back behind one ear. Even he knew the gesture was impatient.

"Calm down or the men will notice."

The advice was good, even if unwelcome. It didn't do for a prince to show his people he was agitated. It did less good for them to know that Shavar, the Comet, felt this way.

"Markis, get a grip. I know what strong emotions do to you. You'll lose control."

"Thoughts of Uly usually calm me." Markis sniggered as he paced, filled his mind with the sight and smell of all that pale hair. "I felt his disgust."

"It wasn't aimed at you." Markis shot Ryanac a look. They had all been in the abyss. Ryanac looked a little chagrined. "Well, fine. It was, but not for reasons you should worry about. Uly escaped death by his best and only friend sacrificing himself. No wonder facing that messed him up."

"What would have happened to Ty?"

"Maybe what Uly imagined. Still, they might have let him live. If he had a skill, they might have let him join the crew, and if Ty taught Uly, he was a good thief. Uly knows there's a chance Ty lived, or he wouldn't have searched for him for so long."

"If he lived, why wouldn't he have returned?"

"He wouldn't have been given the choice. It takes many months for a sailor to trust someone. Longer, if they've captured them."

Markis shook his head. "I don't get how these things work."

Ryanac grimaced. "They have their own sense of justice. If they accepted Ty's skill, he would have been able to work his way off the ship eventually, or stay with them. In some ways, it can be a better life than that which many suffer on land. Maybe he lived and maybe he took to it. Many of these illegal vessels tour the ports, always changing the order they visit, often leaving years in between, especially if they've done something noticeable."

There had not been an illegal vessel in port since Swithin rule. "It could have been our fault the ship never returned."

Ryanac nodded. "True. I think it would be a good idea to let Uly know that."

He would. Still, Markis needed to know the truth. "What were his chances, truly?"

"Maybe seventy-thirty in his favour someone would have noticed his skill. Better than that if he succeeded at proving his worth. A good thief can be worth more than their weight in gold. Could be they even took him knowing all this. In which case, he definitely lived." Ryanac looked considering. "In which case, they wouldn't have treated him as badly as they pretended they would. They use threat sure enough, but seldom see it through if you do as you're told. If they wanted his skills, he lived and likely lived well."

"I hope you're right. And you are correct in that Uly needs to know all this too. I still can't believe he pushed the memory aside."

"The mind can be selective. It blocks things out. You know that."

Markis stopped pacing. He narrowed his gaze, thinking back to certain times they had spent together, times when he almost lost control of the comet and threatened Uly's life. Both times had something to do with Uly's life on the street. "I'm not so sure he blocked it out as much as he thought. There were signs. I just didn't recognise them." He closed his eyes and swayed. Only Ryanac's grip steadied him. "By the comet, Ryanac, I almost killed him once because he reacted in fear. Later, I presumed it was bad memories but I never guessed..." He looked up into Ryanac's eyes. "Why did he even forgive me? Why did you?"

"We forgive those we love some awful things, especially if we have hope for them."

Markis refused to accept the exoneration so easily. "How did you even know how to push him just the right way?" He studied his friend's face while the man just stood, silent, returning his gaze. Markis cursed. "Do I not know anything?"

"Do we have to go over this again? You've not led the kind of life that would make you take such a leap. You know what goes on, but you've not lived amongst it. Your duties wouldn't allow for it."

"It's not that simple." Markis was shaking his head. "There were times when I sensed his reluctance despite his desire. I just thought it was because he struggled to adapt to our way of life. I ignored it because I wanted..." He broke off, recalling Uly clutching at him, fingers entwined into his clothing, head tilted back, mouth slightly open begging for a kiss...

"He still wants you, Markis. As much as I do." Ryanac closed the distance between them, and stroked a finger down the side of Markis's face. The intimate gesture created an answering curl of desire in his lower belly, one that instantly made Markis feel guilty. Their mouths drew close, and just when he expected Ryanac to kiss him, the guard stepped back. "Let's see how Uly's doing," he said, giving Markis a pat on the hip. He walked away, leaving Markis feeling strangely bereft.

## Chapter Twelve

Taking the small cup containing Swithin brandy, Uly grabbed hold of Ryanac's wrist before the big man could pull away. He looked up into that dark gaze. "If I turn my back on something out of fear, particularly when that fear's irrational, then I'll have never really lived, will I?" They had discussed the subject of fear when they first met.

Ryanac shook his head slightly. "Your question lies so open on your face, you already have the answer."

He knew the answer to the second part of his question, too, but needed to say it aloud. "If I don't live, then Ty died for nothing."

"It's a disservice to him if he died and even if he didn't. It's cruel, but true."

Uly let go of his wrist but Ryanac stayed where he was on his knees. Unwilling to look away, Uly studied his face. Something about Ryanac made him look older than Markis, but he wasn't. They were the same age. Both men held a wealth of knowledge in their gazes, but their intelligence differed.

"I'm glad you and Markis had to spend time apart," he suddenly blurted. Ryanac raised one eyebrow so Uly hastened to explain. "You wouldn't be the people you are. You wouldn't be able to help each other as you do."

A gentle chuckle was the guard's only reply. "Beautiful and intelligent," he whispered.

Heat rose to Uly's face. He changed the subject. "I'm glad he has you," he added. "He needs you."

The other man leaned in. "You don't need me?"

If Uly could have blushed more, he would have. Something thickened the air, lay heavy between them like some kind of promise. "Markis said I could learn a lot..." He hesitated. "Watching the two of you make love." He finished speaking just as Markis walked back into the tent. Thankfully, the low tone of his voice didn't carry.

"Did he now?" Ryanac winked before rising to his feet, leaving Uly puzzled, but the guard was already handing Markis a drink. "I think we could all do with one about now," Ryanac said, when Markis looked at it as though not comprehending. Markis looked across the tent in Uly's direction as he took the cup.

"Are you all right?"

All Uly could do was nod. "All right" didn't quite cover it, but he felt better than he expected. A strange kind of peace settled over him. It was warm, comforting, with a wicked smile at its centre. He might never know what happened to wisecracking Ty, but he needed to accept it wasn't his fault.

"Your hair needs brushing." Ryanac addressed the prince.

"No, it doesn't."

"Don't argue with your guard."

Sighing, Markis walked towards the pallet, letting out a little sound of complaint as Ryanac told him he wasn't going to bed with his clothes on. Aware the men stripped, still Uly didn't pay attention. He was a witness to other places, other times, all of them with Ty in them. Along with the bad, good memories resurfaced.

"Why are you smiling?"

Uly started in surprise. He hadn't realised he did. Markis sat regarding him, but Ryanac asked the question. The guard knelt behind Markis, dragging a brush through the prince's hair. Usually, this was an intimate process, but right now Markis hardly seemed to notice. Uly wanted to tell him things would be all right between them, but he didn't know how to do that. Perhaps if he explained why he smiled it would help. Strange that he could, after being so distraught earlier.

"You both would have liked Ty," he said. He looked to Ryanac. "You're a lot like him." He took his gaze from Ryanac to Markis. It looked as if the prince might say something, but then Markis jerked, something else having grabbed his attention.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing," Ryanac replied with just a hint of mischievousness. His hands were busy in that long luxurious hair. He drew it to one side and bent forward, running what had to be a hot, wet tongue by the side of Markis's neck to the back of his ear, licking. Markis gasped and Ryanac chuckled. "He likes that," Ryanac said, then licked downward, until he could nibble on the nape of Markis's neck. The protest that clearly settled on the prince's lips died; the sound became strangled. Ryanac took the advantage and tipped Shavar back into his arms, until the hair spilled out over him. The brushing seemed moot as Ryanac tossed the brush over his shoulder. It landed with a soft *bonk*. To his shock, Uly felt an answering response. How could he not? Markis, with a light smattering of hair over his body, yet all male, all masculine, had a surprised look making his big, beautiful, dark eyes go wide, and

Ryanac was broader, a dark olive contrast against Markis's light but golden skin; you'd have to be dead not to feel something.

The prince's mouth moved, possibly to form a protest, and Ryanac covered it with his lips. Shavar's hair cascaded over his shoulders and back; ripples ran through taut muscles. Markis came up gasping, as Ryanac circled around, pushing him down. Markis shot a heated gaze at Uly. "We shouldn't be doing this." That remark sounded as though that was for his benefit, but Uly wasn't sure Markis should have bothered. He couldn't look away even as Markis pushed at Ryanac's thighs, the prince's eyes widening as Ryanac straddled his chest. "We can't."

"That's not how your mouth should be moving," Ryanac said and, gripping the back of Markis's head, he dragged the prince up, aiming his cock with profound accuracy. A strangled sounding gulp escaped Shavar's lips.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amazingly, Markis had the time to wonder what Ryanac was playing at before his guard and best friend's fingers clawed into his hair, gripping the back of his head viciously. Whatever he had in mind, Ryanac was making sure he couldn't go anywhere. His head was jerked up and forward into a position he would never have been able to maintain if Ryanac's strength wasn't holding him in place. Still, this position would quickly grow uncomfortable and tiring. Markis had to open his mouth quickly or risk raking his teeth across his friend's cock. It would serve Ryanac right, but still, Markis couldn't bring himself to do that. The single noise he managed to utter sounded less like a protest, more like surprise.

The solid length pushed into his mouth and then slid out again, back and forth in hard, short jerks. He closed his eyes without thinking. Ryanac's clean taste and warm smell invaded his senses. Despite the fact that it didn't seem right they should be doing this in front of Uly so soon after recent revelations, to his embarrassment his cock solidified. He couldn't move and that made him harder still. He couldn't truly fight anyway. Besides, he didn't want to. The only part of him that wanted to fight back was in protest at Ryanac's audacity, but it wasn't truly audaciousness. It was just Ryanac being Ryanac. Markis couldn't put much effort into resisting. To do so would make it look like force to Uly, and it wasn't. Still, he pushed feebly at Ryanac's thighs, but it felt as though the man was the weight of a mountain. From this position, Markis couldn't shove him off, and the member in his mouth just plunged deeper the more he fought. He struggled not to gag as the length of it ploughed down his throat. The only way to save being choked was to tighten his lips around it and suck. The minute he did, Ryanac eased up, slowed his movements. The body above him moved at an easy, rhythmic pace. The cock nudged the back of his tongue, stroking.

A voice sounding oddly distant said, "Does this look like force to you? Does it look as if he doesn't like it?" and suddenly, Markis understood what Ryanac was doing. This was a lesson for Uly's benefit. Markis put more effort into it, relaxing the muscles in his neck,

letting Ryanac hold his head in place. Only then did he realise that his hands already clutched at Ryanac's hips, urging. No wonder Ryanac asked if it looked as if he didn't like it. In fact, he loved it. He didn't know why, but it always felt so satisfying to fill his throat like this, to have it stroked from the inside. He'd only done this with two men in his life, and both were here in the room with him. A passing thought made Markis wonder how he looked, and though it occurred to him to care, he couldn't seem to direct his energy to it. He opened his mouth wider, letting Ryanac slide his length out, and then back in. He flicked his tongue back and forth over the head every time it came within reach. He would have grinned if he could when he heard Ryanac's sharp intake of breath. The next best thing was to open his eyes and look up. Markis couldn't see Uly from where he lay, but he could look up the length of Ryanac's rugged torso. Stomach muscles contracted and expanded in time with the man's hip movements. A smattering of hair snaked upwards from his groin finally to flare out over the top of his pecs. That hair was soft to the touch and Markis would have run his fingers through it, raking his nails across the nipples as he did, if he could reach. As an alternative, he cupped Ryanac's backside and urged the big man deeper into him, tilting his head as much as he could until it felt as though the other man's grip might tear his hair out by the roots. Neither of them let up, though. Markis tasted a deceptive sweetness and captured the slight emission on his tongue. Gazing down at him, Ryanac shook his head. The look in his eyes was heated, burning, passionate, and ruthless. Markis almost gulped, but the obstruction in his throat wouldn't allow for it. Whatever Ryanac had in mind, his guard wasn't through tormenting him yet.

As Ryanac finally moved back, Markis pushed against the man's heavy thighs. Despite his understanding of the guard's intent, and despite part of him wanting this, he was Shavar and it felt only right that he should make some sort of protest. Ryanac just chuckled and humped Shavar's body with his thick length as he wormed his way down. Markis stared into Ryanac's eyes in disbelief. "I'm a prince," he complained. It sounded churlish even to him.

Ryanac grinned. "A prince among men," he said.

Markis gave him an ineffectual slap. "You know what I mean," he hissed, keeping his voice low, but aware Uly could hear this. He didn't want Uly to think he wasn't enjoying this, but it seemed right he should form some kind of complaint. After all, he could put to death anyone who touched him without his wishes. It hardly seemed appropriate or respectful that Ryanac could drag his mouth to his cock like that and get away with it.

"I only fuck the best," Ryanac whispered against his lips, and then silenced his protest with his lips. Short of biting him, there wasn't much Markis could do. Even as the thought crossed his mind, Ryanac's eyes narrowed dangerously. They were glued mouth-to-mouth, eye-to-eye. He didn't like the look in Ryanac's eyes at all. It held a warning even Shavar couldn't deny. If he bit Ryanac, there would be consequences, and he didn't even want to contemplate what. He could call the comet, of course, though that seemed extreme. Too late. With the idea, the comet flared to life. Even as he feared what it might do, the power stuttered. Markis frowned, maintaining eye contact. Ryanac's gaze searched his while the



kiss became demanding. A hot, wet tongue flicked over his lips. The comet...*turned*. The power settled somewhere in the back of his mind, its ice chilling his spine, leaving other things to overheat. Almost as if he knew what was happening, Ryanac licked and nibbled his way down. With the cold at Markis's back, the heat provided an interesting contrast. That hot mouth closed over anything interesting it found on the journey. Finally, it flicked at the root of his cock where it joined his body. Markis reached down and tried to grab the back of Ryanac's head. The big man's hands stopped him, holding on to his wrists. Teeth pulled at his foreskin.

A small intake of breath reminded Markis that Uly was here. Markis swallowed, opened his eyes, wondering when he had closed them, and glanced at Uly's face. Ryanac chose that moment to swallow him whole. A happy sound came from his groin, while unintelligible sounds issued from Markis's lips. Where Ryanac opened his throat and took him in quick, the man then pulled back with deliberate, agonising slowness. Markis very much wanted to grab at his head. Only the thought that it might look like force to Uly stopped him...that, and Ryanac's grip. The other man was enjoying this far too much.

Eyes rolling back into his head, Markis swore, doing nothing to hide his reaction. The curse wasn't due to pain or unwillingness. He arched his back, wanting to thrust up with his hips, which was ridiculous, considering he could go no deeper. Ryanac was the only one he knew who could take an entire length and swallow around it. If they ever coaxed Uly from his fear of this, he would have to suggest it to Ryanac and might have to try it himself. The idea of bringing Uly this kind of pleasure was almost greater than the pleasure itself. *Almost...*

Markis glanced at Uly again, afraid to see what he might garner from the young man's expression. Those usually cool eyes looked feverish. Uly's gaze swept from Markis's face, to his groin, and back up to his face again. Uly seemed to be breathing heavily and was trembling. He sat huddled, but, glancing down, Markis caught a glimpse of lower things that had a ripe and aching appearance. Maybe he should invite Uly to the bed.

Before he could complete the thought, Ryanac came up off his cock. It slithered out of Ryanac's mouth wetly and then the guard sat back on his haunches. What was Ryanac up to now?

Markis didn't have long to wait. His eyes widened as Ryanac grabbed his hips, pushing his legs back towards his chest. He opened his mouth to protest at the invasion when an oily shower ran down his thighs coating all things private. From the corner of his eye, Markis saw Ryanac set the bottle aside. When had Ryanac brought that to the bed? Hadn't he been paying attention?

His surprise turned into *"Thank the comet"* as Ryanac nudged him. His body resisted, and then gasped a little in invitation. Markis wasn't relaxed enough, despite the foreplay. He didn't mean to, but he tensed. The comet answered him. It sped down his spine and took control of hidden muscles, stroking them, soothing them from within. Markis's mouth fell

open. Ryanac answered the look on his face with a frown. All he could do was give the other man an almost imperceptible shake of his head. He didn't want Ryanac to stop and, apparently, neither did the comet. How could he explain the comet was taking him along on this ride? Markis had one bright thought in his mind: IN.

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No one needed to tell Uly that Ryanac enjoyed the sight of Markis's eyes roving, occasionally rolling into the back of his head, his enthusiastic squirming. The sight of Markis spread, stuck like a beetle on his back, impaled on a not inconsiderable pin, made Uly gape. Ryanac moved his hips slightly and Uly had no doubt the man did it to provide him with a better view. The guard turned his head to look across the room at him.

Uly met Ryanac's gaze, his eyes wide, but unable to do anything about it. The quiet tremors passing through Uly this time were nothing to do with fear. Ryanac lifted up, easing into a press-up. The move curled Markis's body into more of a roll, and displayed the deep, thrusting movements fully. Then, for some reason, Ryanac hissed and stared down into Shavar's face. Whatever Markis had done, the big man narrowed his gaze, and Shavar's expression went through sudden and contrasting changes. Triumph, surprise, dismay, desperation, pleading, all played out over the prince's face. His hand reached for his cock but, with a smooth, fluid manoeuvre, Ryanac braced his weight on one hand, grabbed Markis's wandering fingers, and pulled them back down to the bed. The way Ryanac stared into Markis's eyes warned against trying that again.

A slight sound fell from Uly's lips and Ryanac turned his head once again. Only then did Uly realise he had crawled forward further onto the bed. Unperturbed, Ryanac kept moving, alternating long, deep strokes with some shorter, sharper ones, apparently whatever his body demanded, ignoring the prince's needs. The guard came suddenly, shuddering, the pleasure of the moment making even Ryanac look vulnerable. Markis cried out in shock, and Uly almost echoed the sentiment as the big man pulled out abruptly. Even as he did, Ryanac gathered up Markis's body in his hands, holding his legs back, and invading him with his fingers. Markis groaned and writhed.

"Your prince needs a kiss," Ryanac remarked, almost casually. Markis needed more than that, judging by the sight of him. The prince's back arching, his shoulders pressed tight to the pallet, his shaft hard and leaking a pool of moisture onto his stomach were all indications of that. Uly crawled across the pallet and this time when Markis reached up, Ryanac let him. Markis drew Uly's lips down to his. Markis kissed him, hard, unyielding, in a way that reeked of desperation. As they broke for air, Uly could see Ryanac glancing down to his crotch. From the pale nest, a stiff member rose with an almost ruby head. Uly blushed.

"Your prince needs you," Ryanac whispered. Unable to help it, Uly's gaze dropped to where Ryanac's fingers were at work. As aroused as he was, he also felt oddly numb. It took a

moment for the comment to sink in before he understood what Ryanac wanted him to do. Apparently, Markis finally understood too. The movement was slight but Shavar tensed.

"He needs you to take him."

Uly shook his head. "I've never..."

"I know that. It's so right, then, that Markis be the first man you take. He's open and wet for you, needy. He wants this. Don't you?" Ryanac moved his fingers, beckoning Uly's gaze down to that hidden place. Uly's cock gave a twitch. "Take him. Claim him." That canal closed around Ryanac's fingers, sucked at them, held them in. Markis jerked in response and squeezed, and Uly saw it all. Maybe that was the type of movement that had made Ryanac hiss.

Ryanac reached out and caught Uly's hand in his, directing the tips of his fingers. A small moan escaped Uly's lips as they both brushed over the wet, inviting rosette. Slowly, Ryanac released his grip.

"Say you want him." Ryanac shot Markis a look at the same time he scooted up the bed, drawing Markis's legs back as he did. The prince gasped; Uly's name emerged from his throat, sounding strangled. "You want Uly inside you," Ryanac whispered into the prince's ear. "You want him stroking and gliding, plunging deep." Some inner struggle passed over Markis's face and then faded. Those dark eyes went from staring at the roof of the tent, to gazing down his body between his legs to Uly's face. Uly looked up and met the prince's gaze. His fingers were busy, but Uly had time to wonder what he gave away in his expression. He was no fool. Ryanac was manipulating him and Shavar both. He also understood that this mattered. Part of him wanted this. He looked up from Markis's vivid gaze at Ryanac. In that instant, a strange certainty washed over him that he and the guard understood one another.

Almost as if Ryanac had heard him, the guard whispered, "Give him what he needs." Ryanac no longer held Markis down. The prince lay compliant, waiting. Uly gripped his cock, almost wincing at how hot and sore with need it felt. He rubbed it around the opening, cooling it with the secretions that leaked from Markis's already abused flesh. The thought that this part of Markis beckoned to him, lubricated with oil and Ryanac's seed, made him shake. Giving a tentative push, Markis's body opened to welcome him in.

A flash of guilt and thoughts of pity flashed through his mind. Markis writhed under the onslaught. Shavar's legs moved down his body, gripped his sides, coiled around him, and urged him in. Glancing between their joined bodies, Uly was just in time to see another emission pulse from the tip of Markis's cock. Then he ground himself home, careful not to stroke their bodies together. If Markis minded, he said not a word, just a sound that, while it contained pain, also held a great deal of satisfaction.

Kneeling at Shavar's head, Ryanac caught Markis's face in his hands, angled their mouths and plunged his tongue deep between the prince's lips. Markis reached up, clawing. They kissed, lapping tongues, mouths opening, giving Uly a perfect view of their union.

Markis's body was so tense now it dripped sweat and thrummed. It seemed cruel not to touch that aching cock. As if Ryanac heard the thought, he looked up and shook his head. Uly failed to understand, but it didn't matter. Pleasure carried him where it wanted.

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How could he go on like this? The answer was, he couldn't. As Uly spilled thick hot ropes of seed into him, some part of Markis's body twitched deep inside. He should have come from the assault alone. His cock burned now. He was sure that to touch it would be almost painful. What choice did he have? If he didn't come, he feared insanity, or he might unwittingly call the comet. With the thought he realised he had been trying to all along. For once, he searched for it to help combat the sensations that scoured him. Even now, he snatched at it and it evaded. The damn thing was enjoying itself.

The idea of it as a living, separate thing always frightened him, yet to think like that was inaccurate. It wasn't a separate entity. It was still part of him just as his cock was part of him, just as his heart could ache in pain, part of him but separate, and just as his cock sometimes had a mind of its own making. Now, he cursed its interference, for the comet played with him. It liked this too much, but there was also another reason. The damn thing responded to Ryanac.

"By the comet." He hissed out the words but something in his voice made Ryanac glance his way. Right now, finishing this was in Ryanac's hands and, by the sweet comet, Markis so needed this to finish.

He groaned, writhed, begged with his body. Uly collapsed at his side, stroking, comforting his flesh. It wasn't enough to ease Markis down from the ride. Markis almost screamed as Ryanac fastened his lips around his swollen, weeping cockhead. Ryanac chuckled and the sound reverberated to his testicles. Aware Uly moved, Markis tried to look down, but he couldn't focus and the image broke up. All the while, his cock disappeared into that hot, torturous, wet depth. The heat withdrew, leaving his overheated flesh wet so that cooler air rushed in. The heat returned to hold the head of his cock in an almost gentle embrace. A second hot wetness touched his cock where it burrowed into the depths of his body.

Markis opened his eyes and saw stars. He was blind to everything except golden light in the midst of infinite darkness. The cold licked his spine, making him cry out in delight. Another tongue tormented him, this one flicking back and forth over his dick until it came close to the mouth covering his cockhead, then moved up again. Ryanac suckled him and Uly licked. The comet watched and writhed in pleasure, in unison. If he lost control just then and killed them all, Markis wasn't sure he could have cared. The thought should have frightened him, but it didn't. He wasn't going to lose control, not of the comet. He was going to reach the crest of an entirely different wave in a very few minutes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Uly's fear of doing this with Markis was completely irrational, and yet still he wasn't ready. His throat tightened, and he longed to force it open with something hard and unrelenting. He couldn't bring himself to do it. Ryanac took such obvious enjoyment from the act that he suddenly knew Ryanac had done all this on purpose. He wanted to hate the guard, or at least display his annoyance. He couldn't do that either. Ryanac took his fear from him, closing his mouth over the painfully purple head, leaving Uly the rest of Markis's shaft to deal with. He wasn't ready to suck, but he could lick.

Drawing back as Markis's body rode the pallet beneath them, Uly saw Ryanac lift his head. A thin thread of moisture trailed from his lips to the purple crown. Gathering the moisture at the slit onto a fingertip, Ryanac reached out and trailed it around Uly's lips. Almost without thought, his tongue went out to lick his lips and the invasive finger. Ryanac would suckle and take down Markis's offering. Uly would lick, but before he did, there was something else he wanted to do. Moving close, he caught Ryanac's lips with his own, Markis's cock brushing against their joined mouths.

Ryanac breathed into his mouth as they broke the kiss. Swallowing, aware his doubts and fears showed on his face, Uly froze as Ryanac reached a hand around to the back of his head. Fearing the guard would force his head down onto Markis's cock, Uly almost sagged in relief when all Ryanac did was run his fingers through his hair, stroking. Even so, turning his head caused the soft, wet, velvet skin of Markis's cock to glide along the side of his face. It teased the corner of his mouth and settled against his lips. Uly wanted to take it in and he did, but his lips trembled in hesitation. The slight movement made Markis gasp, and the sound called to Uly's need. He closed his eyes as his lips parted and his mouth moved smoothly over the soft glans. He felt the ripe plum fill his mouth, kept still for a moment, feeling it, tasting it, and then drew back. No one stopped him. No one caught at his head, forced its length down his throat. He was almost sorry when he stopped, but a ghost of doubt lingered and he couldn't ignore it. Looking up the length of Markis's body, he saw those dark eyes gaze his way. They seemed to swim in and out as though the prince had trouble focusing, but he could tell by the smile on Shavar's lips that he had known when Uly finally tasted him. Markis would wait until he was ready. Then, like the first time Markis had penetrated him, it would be good for them both. He could still take part in the moment. When Ryanac pulled him down, Uly went willingly.

Once more, they kissed, the shaft running back and forth between their touching lips, tongues stroking. He heard Ryanac chuckle and opened his eyes to watch the guard take over, opening his mouth impossibly wide. Uly set to work licking, soft curls tickling against his lips and the side of his face. Fingers dug into his scalp, pulled at his hair, and he let them. There was nothing threatening in the movement. No one forced him to do this. Something greedy awoke in the joining of their flesh. His cock throbbed, brought to life again. A hand took hold of his and guided his fingers to a second heated crotch. Thick meat filled his palm and Uly stroked it, pulling back the skin, flicking a thumb over the head. Even with Markis's cock filling the man's mouth, he heard Ryanac's hiss.

A hand gripped him in turn, expertly jerking. White light flashed. Glancing up, Uly saw encircling light. It beat and pulsed. He heard Markis's voice, "It's never felt like this," and looked down straight into Ryanac's eyes. They licked and gnawed, unable to answer the prince while their mouths were busy. A light in Ryanac's eyes danced, and it was unrelated to the comet. The comet joined their flesh. It caressed, tasted them, laughed, and rolled over them. Uly had already come and he couldn't wait to come again. There was no way Markis could hold out. One hand busy at Ryanac's groin, he reached beneath with the other, aware Ryanac watched him from a heartbeat away, and slipped his fingers into the prince's overstretched depths. Markis screamed, his pulse beating out its rhythm against Uly's lips, spilling his seed into Ryanac's willing, waiting mouth. The comet shrieked and ripped his and Ryanac's spirit up through their skin, sending their essence into the universe together with their combined release.

## Chapter Thirteen

“What are these?”

If Antal said weapons, Uly planned to kick him, or at least try. From the look of amusement on the young man’s face, the young guard knew it, too.

“I know you’ve a liking for the rapier. It’s a smart weapon and good for thrusting in the gap of an opponent’s armour, but I’ve no better liking for it than Ryanac, though for different reasons. For more control, some will tell you to put your finger over the cross-guard. Do that and parry low, when you meet your enemy’s blade, the two will sever your finger.”

Uly winced. “Why couldn’t Ryanac have just told me that instead of telling me it’s a peacock’s weapon?”

“Is that what he said?”

Uly nodded. Antal quietly laughed and turned back to the display of weapons laid out in the back of the wagon. “Some of these I only want to show you for now. You should know what an opponent might use. These” -- Antal held up a matching pair of blades -- “Ryanac and I have agreed might suit you well. They are Sai and you use one in each hand. Female warriors sometimes favour them as the hilt is slim, but you are quick of hand and I believe will find them ideal.”

“You have female warriors?” The term warrior seemed to fit strangely ill with what he knew of the Swithin. Guardsmen he could get his head around, but warrior seemed to fit with a more savage society.

“We do not send our women to war, but neither do we keep them away from it. We take on some women if they suit the task well. They make good spies.” Antal grinned all the while he said this.

"What's this?" Uly picked up a dagger that had a black handle decorated with fine wirework. It looked a smart weapon, but the reason he picked it was that the blade confused him. It had a split up the middle.

"It's called a claw. There are many types. The split blade means it cuts more than once." Antal picked up a similar dagger. "This one does worse damage. See the serrations." He pointed them out at the top of the internal split blade near the hilt. "The blades make four cuts going in. On the way out, they snag and rip."

Uly dropped the dagger in his hand back into the pile, careless of damaging it. It clanked against various thicknesses of steel. Aware Antal watched him, still he could do nothing to hide his distaste.

"These aren't toys. We don't use them without provocation. No one here has ever wanted to go to war, yet we all took an oath to die to protect the things we hold dear. You flinch now, but would you flinch so much if required to defend the life of your prince?"

"I would have thought with such power at his fingertips, Markis could take care of himself."

Sounding somewhat despondent and with a rueful smile, Antal recovered the tossed dagger and returned it to its proper place. "Even a prince must sleep. He is as human as the rest of us in too many ways. He can be injured and hurt like the rest of us. He has to guard his flesh, his...heart."

He was beginning to think Antal and Ryanac were related. Even if he needed it, Uly was in no mood for a sensitive ear. "I thought you were going to teach me how to fight?" The words snapped out too sharply, but it was too late to take them back. Antal regarded him for a moment, and then nodded.

"As well as these, I want to teach you to use my favourite weapon."

To Uly's surprise, Antal reached down for a blade at his side. Even when he withdrew it and held it before Uly's face, it took time for him to register what he was seeing.

"It's called a reaper."

*He's not kidding.* The dagger had two blades, but unlike the claw where they both pointed straight and lay side by side, as though someone simply forgot to forge some of the metal up the middle, there was no way you could think this weapon a mistake. Uly took hold of the simple wooden handle. As he tested the weight, he looked up to meet Antal's gaze.

"It's a little heavier than some daggers," Antal confirmed, "but easier to wield than it looks. Do you need me to explain how it's used?"

Uly shook his head. No. Tactics would be a different matter, but the weapon's intent was obvious. The main blade was a foot in length, slightly curved, pointed, finely edged. It would cut on both sides. This blade extended from the handle at the front of his hand between his thumb and first finger. The second blade was half that length and extended from the other end of the handle at the back of his hand. It then curved around to point forward



again, right over the back of his hand and past his fingers. Most surprising, this would offer the wielder some protection for his hand. On the inside, the cutting edge only extended a little past the tip. The cutting edge on the smaller second blade was towards the outside. As you stabbed with the longer main blade, as you swept back you could, by accident or intent, slice with the second smaller knife edge. No one needed to explain that it was wickedly sharp. The leather sheath had two slots to cover both blades. The design provided a fluidness of movement that somehow reminded Uly of water. He said so.

"If you know how to use it just right, it can be fought with fluidly as well."

Uly nodded. He'd taken to spending his days with Antal, but he didn't have to stay at night. So much had happened in the last few days that he struggled to cope with the strange sensation that, suddenly and inexplicably, he had grown up, and it was unrelated to his age. Sparring, learning from Antal, meant good and easy company and sufficient distraction. Besides, holding up the blade, the glint of light reflecting back into his eye made him think of Markis; it made him think of what he had witnessed the other morning.

After the night of lovemaking, Uly fell into a deep sleep where strange flickering shadows chased him. They hadn't frightened him, though. What alarmed him was waking to find Markis sitting cross-legged, playing with a small, glowing ball of light. He watched Markis pass it back and forth between his fingertips, roll the light around in his hand as though it were solid, and then when Markis realised that both he and Ryanac were watching, the prince smiled and the light dissolved to sink into his skin. Uly didn't understand it but, apparently, sharing the abyss as well as the incredible night of sex was good for the prince. He gained more control of the comet every day now. Uly didn't know if he should feel pleased for the man, or annoyed with him.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Stop worrying. He'll be fine.*

I'M NOT. I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE SAYING.

*Markis, I'm inside your mind. I can feel it. The abyss is riddled with nothing but your anxiety. It's not good for you and it's certainly not good for the comet. Uly will be fine.*

HE HAS NEVER ASKED FOR TIME AWAY FROM ME BEFORE.

*Well, once, he didn't have to. If I recall, you did everything to avoid him. Wry amusement accompanied the thought. He asked and you agreed. Time with Antal will do him good. Or...oh wait, are you still jealous?*

LET'S NOT GO THROUGH THIS AGAIN. Markis couldn't hide his irritation. WE'RE SWITHIN...

*Yeah, sure. So so so.*

Markis received a mental impression of someone "not listening" and the communication that being Swithin didn't cure everything.

*Can we get back to what we should be doing? You're making me nervous.*

The idea of him making Ryanac nervous caused Markis to smile, and he was aware of it both here in the abyss and in reality. They were becoming more adept at this, and could now often tell what they were doing in the real world. Uly would be furious, though, to know they did this unattended, but the young man had chosen to go off with his friends and wouldn't return until late. Markis set a guard outside the tent, but at some distance. He didn't want those outside to know what was going on. They believed he was practicing a lesson and, in a way, they were right, but this was nothing the seers or stargazers taught. In fact, if Stargazer had anything to do with it, he would never have learned how to do this at all.

As an experiment, in reality he ran a hand up Ryanac's arm. His friend's hand moved an instant later. They linked hands and entwined their fingers.

*I'm looking forward to when we can have sex and do this.*

QUIET. He tried to sound annoyed but, the trouble was, you were unable to hide your true feelings here. Ryanac meant what he said and Markis believed soon it would be possible. The thought of being on both sides of the experience suddenly made him feel weak. Ryanac chuckled.

TAKE US SOMEWHERE. Markis sighed. YOU'RE THE ONE WHO WANTED TO GET ON WITH THIS. He looked around through Ryanac's eyes. WHY ARE WE BACK HERE?

*Oh damn.* Ryanac tugged, wanting to be away from here, but Markis held on.

They stared out over a battlefield strewn with the dead at the battle of Kimber Pass.

In the real world, Markis opened his eyes. He had never done that before. He could see Ryanac's face as an overlay and through him, Ryanac saw the same thing. The experience was eerie as hell. Markis closed his eyes again.

WHY DO YOU HAVE THAT LOOK ON YOUR FACE?

*What look?*

YOU HAVE IT ON YOUR FACE HERE AND OUT IN THE WORLD. Before Markis could demand more information, the scene skipped. So did Ryanac's heart. The big man wanted to stop this. THE ONLY WAY YOU CAN DO THAT IS TO TAKE US OUT OF HERE.

Ryanac gave Markis an uncertain look. *You would let me do that?*

Impatience and more irritation from Markis flowed through the abyss.

*All right, all right. I did agree to this.*

In the memory, a firm grip settled on his right shoulder where Ryanac hunkered down surveying the field.

"Come away," Errick Samari said. Back then, he was Ryanac's commander.

Ryanac, surveying the sea of dead bodies, nodded but didn't move. The hand on his shoulder squeezed. "Whatever you're feeling, it's natural."

"I don't feel anything," Ryanac murmured. He didn't, couldn't, hadn't. Even now, looking back on it, all he felt was empty. So much waste ought to have stronger emotions attached to it.

"That's common too," was all Errick Samari said. "We'll do what we can for the dead, but we need to see to the living first. Ryanac." That calm firm voice called to him. The younger man turned his head. "You need stitches."

He had almost forgotten the cut on his cheek. A slow, spreading smile touched the captain's lips. "We don't want that pretty face scarred too much, do we?"

The scene sped ahead. They were back at camp. Errick held out a cup of Swithin brandy, and through Ryanac's eyes, both men saw a strangely handsome man. Puzzlement filled the abyss before Markis could do anything about it, and Ryanac understood why. The man had scars and reddish brown hair turning white. He wasn't handsome, just rather striking. His skin was weathered, one eye slightly out of whack.

"You're going to have to get hard pretty fast," Errick said, in a sympathetic and understanding tone.

Ryanac cracked a smile and winked. "I always get hard fast."

Errick Samari shook his head. "I didn't mean your dick."

RYANAC! YOU DIDN'T.

Markis hadn't really expected an answer, or maybe just his friend's chuckle. He didn't expect Ryanac's mouth to run away with him.

*We weren't the only ones fucking that day. We watched friends and family die. We killed. There were people out there who would never see their loved ones again because of us, even though they had given us no choice. No one likes to kill. If they do, that's when they should step aside.*

That was true. To anaesthetise oneself to it was one thing, but you should never enjoy it. If a man came to enjoy the fight, then he was no longer trustworthy. You couldn't allow a man like that to fight at your side.

*Those of us still among the living sought out comfort. We needed to feel alive. There were no women at the Kimber Pass. Even if there had been, I wanted something hard. I wanted...*

From Ryanac's viewpoint, they dropped to his knees and began to unfasten his commanding officer's breeches. Errick looked shocked, more lost than on any battlefield. Ryanac sucked and murmured happily. Fingers ran through his hair almost tenderly. Tender was something he didn't want. He pulled off. Errick looked glad he did. He went to step back but Ryanac held on with an obvious grip.

"I don't feel anything," the younger Ryanac said, gazing upwards. "Please. Make me feel something."

Pain and indecision flickered over the other man's face. Those fingers returned to his hair, to his face, avoiding the cut on his cheek. "Oh, Ryanac," his captain said. The scene changed to...

Raw, hard, pounding flesh, nails used as claws, teeth on skin, haste, no lubricant, not even spit, bolts of pain and rough, unforgiving tongues and lips scraped by clashing teeth, digging fingers in, and more pain giving way to unrelenting need...

BY THE COMET, RYANAC.

*I couldn't feel anything. Not a damn thing. I needed to feel something. I needed to feel alive and that included the pain of living as well as the desire. I needed to touch, be touched. He was my commander; he shouldn't have, and neither of us cared. I wanted him to make me bleed and he did, but not where I thought he might. Somehow, we tore the stitches in my cheek. It's a wonder the scar isn't worse than it is. Can we take a break?*

The mere thought of wanting to be away took them out of there. Markis blinked, opening his eyes to the interior of the tent. Once again, he and Ryanac sat facing each other. His guard watched his eyes, met his gaze. Markis couldn't read his expression.

"What do you want me to say?" Markis asked.

Ryanac shook his head. "I've never even told anyone that and now you know how it felt. Some of that I would have spared you. Maybe this isn't such a good idea."

"If you mean the pain of it..." Markis shrugged. "The pain of the battle..." He looked down, then up, and just shook his head. "The physical pain you wanted and needed is something else." A rueful smile touched his lips. "You've always been gentle by comparison to what I just watched. I'm not truly shocked. I just never knew. Do you really want to stop?"

A soft laugh left Ryanac's lips. "We can't."

"No." Markis couldn't find the words to explain it, but they had started this thing. Now, not he, Ryanac, or the comet would be happy if they didn't see it through to the end.

\* \* \* \* \*

A soft, sibilant unease filled the abyss. The truth was, they could have experienced each other's lives in the blink of an eye, but it wouldn't have helped their mental or emotional states. The experience might not be too kind to their physical states either. Neither of them wished to have their minds blasted out of their heads. Besides, it felt polite to do it this way, drifting where thoughts and emotions took them. Markis could have dug out the information he wanted, but he preferred to ask. If Ryanac wanted to refuse, he could

choose to pull out of the experience completely or Markis could simply respect his privacy. The indecision of the moment rippled through the darkness, followed by Ryanac's soft sigh.

"Shavar wants him neat and clean, not picturesque."

Of all the things Markis felt while sharing the abyss, puzzlement was high on the list. Answers came more quickly now to either of them. This was Ryanac's memory of the day after they captured Uly. Markis ordered that Ryanac take care of Uly, get his hair trimmed. Ryanac thought the younger man's nails in more of a state. He had taken him for grooming and one of the women who attended was...

Petra stood up and now backed away, a mischievous grin on her face. The guard's attention remained almost solely on the sight of her cleavage as she pulled at the laces at her breast and the dress gaped, but from the corner of his eye, Ryanac saw Uly's eyes widen in shock. Amused and pleased by the response, he stalked Petra, clasping her about the waist and tugging her forwards against him. "Afternoon, Petra," he growled.

THIS IS THE DAY YOU TOLD ME HE WATCHED THE TWO OF YOU. I SAID YOU HAD KNOWN HE WOULD, BUT I HADN'T REALISED YOU WANTED HIM TO. YOU ALMOST PLANNED IT.

An abrupt reply chased the puzzlement back. Ryanac answered not in words but in a stream of thought, explaining within seconds that while others had overseen the task of refining Uly's reading skills and other things, he chose to begin Uly's learning right away. He insisted he hadn't planned this, but once he saw the opportunity, he went where it led. Images of the docks leading into the lower city, taverns, alleys, children eating out of garbage pails, others even older than Uly's then almost twenty-two years being kicked, beaten off by straps and sticks if they asked for bread, let alone money, flickered to life and died out. This and worse had been Uly's life. The Swithin had changed much of this already and things would continue to improve in the province they so recently left, but to think...

Acid burned the back of Markis's throat and caused the comet to shift. The golden light broke up into a spiral of stars.

*Easy.*

In reality, Ryanac reached out and slid an arm around his friend's waist and dragged Markis's mind back to why the guard seduced Petra that day, not that Petra took much seducing. Uly hadn't seen anything of love and only the wrong side of lust up until that day. Ryanac had known this the moment he set eyes on him. He had also seen something else.

An image flashed, showing the dining room with the huge table that could seat up to thirty-six guests. This was Swithin knotwood, which leaked treacle-like sap when cut. It provided a highly polished wood so dark as to be almost black. Markis ignored the familiar view of the room, though he liked the richly panelled walls overhung with the red tapestries. He ignored the sight now as he had then, but this time through Ryanac's eyes, he could see his own face.

THIS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH PETRA OR MY QUESTION, Markis almost snapped.

*No. We'll get back to that. You need to see this too, and you're just avoiding.*

Through Ryanac's memory, they witnessed the moment when Uly looked up, but then Ryanac had quickly glanced at Shavar's face. Markis's wince shuddered through the abyss. He had quickly schooled his face, but his guard knew him too well. No one else might have noticed, but Ryanac had seen the gaping surprise, momentary delight, and sense of wonderment, and...other things on Markis's face. Uly had bathed and changed but this only drew the eye to his emaciated appearance. His hair changed colour with the washing. It hung pale blond, shoulder-length and uneven, swept back from his face to leave those haunted eyes staring out at the world. The eyes more than anything caught Markis's gaze. He had thought at the time it was just because of the haunted look in them. Then Uly had dropped his gaze.

WHAT AM I READING IN HIS FACE?

*Pain, fear, hope, shame at his appearance, not to mention a liking for what he sees.*

Markis opened his eyes and looked at Ryanac in the real world. Sighing, Ryanac did the same. It pushed the abyss slightly back, though both remained aware of it.

"No." Markis spoke aloud. "Even if I had felt something, though I wasn't aware of it" -- he hardened his voice and spoke pointedly on the last while Ryanac grinned -- "there's no way he felt any of that for me."

"Not as consciously."

Markis opened his mouth to protest, but Ryanac raised an eyebrow. He sat holding Markis's hands while the prince sought through his mind, going back to that other place and time to examine his feelings. His eyes wandered; he could feel that his face tightened in little twitches while he shifted through the tangle. "Damn," he finally exclaimed. Ryanac chuckled. "You read all that in my face? How could you know it when I didn't even realise?"

The big man shrugged. "What are you thinking?"

Attached to the abyss, the answers to such questions were already there, but they both preferred mixing it with verbal communication. "I'm thinking I should have been more careful around you." Markis shrugged this time. "It's a bit late for that now. Uly couldn't have felt it, though."

Ryanac didn't speak. His certainty just...*existed*.

"He's naturally optimistic and curious. He likes to be clean. The room was full of enticing smells and there was the promise of food just a few feet away. We fed him. He held on to some of the fear, which was sensible, but he was also puzzled, tired, and comfortable for the first time in months or years. Besides, our idea of comfort and his are so far apart, we overwhelmed him."

"No, Markis," Ryanac added at the silent question of whether Uly had stayed purely out of need, gratitude, or a combination of those things. "You know him better than that by now. I knew him better then. I just wanted to make sure. I spent the next few months guiding him, teaching him--"

"You manipulated him."

Ryanac grinned. "It's what I do best and I only led him where he wanted to go, where you wanted him to be. If you don't realise that, then you never saw in his eyes what I did."

Images flashed, overlapped, almost blurred. Markis had to close his eyes to view the abyss. The three of them sat at dinner and Uly glanced up. The thief sat watching Markis but, even brief, the gaze was intense yet absent of malice. The look was one of curiosity. Uly walked down a corridor looking up, seeing the two men walking ahead, his gaze quickly going from Ryanac to Markis. The look was one of longing. Uly went from one class to another, bumping into Markis occasionally in passing. The look was one of someone who would rather go with him than to a lesson. Uly brushed Markis's hair when he lay unconscious after a bad session...

Markis opened his eyes. He hadn't known that had happened and Ryanac opened his mind freely, not only to let him run with it, but to drag him into it, into the argument Ryanac had initiated. He hadn't started it intentionally, but Uly had reacted to a comment and Ryanac took the opportunity. Uly had defended...his prince.

"Stop it!" Markis pulled back and shattered the abyss. He stood up, paced, digging his hands into his scalp under his hair, the long tresses overflowing his fingers being the only thing that covered him. He covered his ears with his hands as though that would block the emotions out, but the feelings weren't a sound he could block or a taste he could spit. *His prince*. With that thought he could feel an overwhelming sense of love and devotion. They couldn't be Uly's feelings, they weren't privileged to them, so they had to be Ryanac's, and yet under it all was his guard's certainty and reassurance that Uly felt exactly the same things.

The big man came up behind him, encircling him with his arms, drawing him back against his chest.

"Come back," Ryanac said. "Take us back into the abyss."

Markis shook his head. "You saw the way I looked at him and you manipulated me, manipulated us both, all the way. I want to hate you for that, but I can't. I'm unhappy, though. Nevertheless, how could you stand knowing what I felt for him?"

"I stood it because it never changed your feelings for me. I stood it because you wanted something for yourself. Something that had nothing to do with the comet. I told you that, and Uly is easy to love and to share love with."

Words whispered out before Markis could stop them. "You love me."

"You know that."

"I know that. But to feel it..." Tears stung the back of his eyes. Closing them, Markis turned in the larger man's arms, drawing him into a hug. He laid his head against Ryanac's shoulder and reopened the abyss. It came too easily now, particularly when Ryanac was near. "Take us back to Petra. Just that, for now."

Standing there, holding each other, the stars gathered them up and whisked them down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ryanac spread his right hand and ran it up and down Petra's thigh. Petra loved having her naked thighs stroked, but even through the skirt, she would like it. He chuckled, sending out the thought that maybe that was a little too much information for Markis, but it was the truth. Markis gave a start.

SHOULD WE BE DOING THIS?

*It's a little late to think about that now. Besides, what's the difference in my telling you what happened?*

TELLING IS ONE THING. THIS IS...INTIMATE. PETRA MIGHT NOT LIKE IT.

Neither might any of the others like knowing their prince, or soon-to-be king, knew so much about them, but Ryanac couldn't care even if he tried and he wasn't inclined to try.

YOU CAN'T EVEN FEEL GUILTY.

He would feel guilty sharing any of Markis's feelings with anyone else, but the guard couldn't feel guilty sharing anything with Markis. The complexity of that wasn't lost on either of them.

*You're only getting what I'm feeling.*

I KNOW, BUT I FEEL LIKE I'M... Markis stuttered over the thought.

*Fucking her?*

The idea felt a little too uncomfortable for Markis's liking even if it wasn't for real, even if she never found out, and even it was only his consciousness inside another man's mind.

*I need you to see this. I've picked this time because it involves Uly too. It's the least private moment I have with her.*

DID SHE KNOW HE WATCHED?

*No, but she wouldn't have cared if he did. She did open her dress in front of him, after all.*

Even for the Swithin that seemed a little too carefree. If you came upon someone having sex, you shared a laugh without embarrassment, and no one thought anything of a public display of affection or nudity, but to just do it with no regard seemed...sleazy.



“Sleazy?” In the real world, Ryanac spoke aloud and laughed. His breath tickled Markis’s ear.

*She’s only this way with me. She’s always been this way with me. Anytime, anywhere. She’s always let me know that.*

Back then the touch on her thigh made Petra jerk. She grinned, but Ryanac recognised the look for one of lust. Barely suppressed need roared through him. He needed his lips on hers, to bring their faces close. He closed his eyes, pressed his lips against her mouth in a closed kiss, yet let her feel the strength he possessed even in his lips.

“Do you have to do that here?” The other woman in the room who worked on Uly’s nails sounded bored. Ryanac laughed.

“Jealous?”

“Maybe a little bit.”

“There’s enough for two,” Ryanac teased. Petra slapped at him. He liked that. He liked it a lot.

A sense of heat slithered into the abyss. Embarrassment?

RYANAC, I DIDN’T KNOW YOU COULD BE EMBARRASSED.

Someone swung a strap at Ryanac but he was older and it wasn’t his mother; he grunted, cried out, but it wasn’t entirely pain. Yes, Markis had glimpsed that memory before. More pink heat flooded into the abyss.

RYANAC?

*Not now. Another time.*

The abyss shivered with embarrassment, along with courage and determination. If Markis wanted to, Ryanac would let him see, though he would squirm in the process. Markis grinned, alarmingly evil and wicked.

“And I’ve told you, if it’s a threesome I want two men.”

Ryanac dragged them back to the memory where he was the one grinning. “That can be arranged.”

SO, THAT’S HOW IT FEELS ON YOUR FACE. NO WONDER YOU GRIN SO MUCH.

To hell with the foreplay...

THAT WAS FOREPLAY?

...this time when Ryanac pulled Petra to him, his tongue stabbed into her mouth. She tensed, but he had played this game with her before. She twisted in his arms, causing her body to writhe against him. His uniform bore down against her tender flesh. She slapped at him, but he ignored her. She did this to make him grab her wrists and hold her... She tried to kick, but he held her hands in his. He ground his pelvis into her, bruising, knowing she would bitch to the stars about it tomorrow while the words belied the look in her eyes that

said she savoured the small pain. He looped the cord around her wrist, tugged it, deliberately hurting her just enough, but not too much. The bed creaked with the strain...

In the real world, they opened their eyes. Ryanac tried to look innocent but, his face couldn't hold the expression. Unwittingly, he had dragged them into another memory.

"Sorry. Got sidetracked."

Sinking into the abyss once again, Petra grabbed him -- them -- about the shoulders. Their tongues touched and circled, their lips open, gaping so that cool air rushed in to the heat of their mouths. Ryanac looked through the slits of his eyes and saw Uly quickly look the other way. He didn't manage to look away for long and already Petra's fingers deftly unfastened the front of Ryanac's uniform. Even though she knew how and her movements seemed fluid, the odd twitch of her fingers declared her desperation. Her fingers ran out and caressed his chest, brushing lightly over his nipples. The touch conveyed less than passion but, as always, her eyes looked dazed. She always gazed this way when she glimpsed his body.

MY, WE'RE MODEST.

*Strange. I recall a similar look in your eye.*

The pink tinge in the abyss reddened.

Warm creamy flesh spilled into Ryanac's hands, topped with rosy pink tips that jutted out and begged for licking. Ryanac had pulled open the cloth covering her chest and scooped up her breasts.

I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU DID THAT. Still Markis swallowed painfully.

*She's so gorgeous. Voluptuous.*

Aware Uly stared at the woman who had her head back, a look somewhere between bliss and surrender on her face, Ryanac couldn't help wondering if the street thief saw what he saw. He had wanted to claim her, taste her skin. Petra would like him to hold her tight while he did, but he couldn't do that. Uly would take that the wrong way and see it as force. Instead, he wrapped her braid around his hand and pulled her head back, exposing her throat. He trailed his tongue and teeth down her neck, mixing the pleasure with just a little pain.

WHAT IS IT WITH YOU AND PAIN?

*The right pain at the right time. You should try it.*

A few random images of what Ryanac might do to him sometime brought a sound from Markis's throat. In reality, his cock already hardened. The sight of Petra had done that, and there was no shame in it. It pressed inconveniently into Ryanac's groin, though. Now it jerked against him, the images bombarding raw and sensitive nerve endings. Markis could try to move back, but those big strong arms weren't about to let him go.

BIG STRONG ARMS? I'M THINKING LIKE AN ADOLESCENT GIRL.

Markis hadn't meant to send the thought out, but the thought and the emotion that went with it were bright and clear. Ryanac chuckled into his ear and made no bones about grinding his hardness into him. Meanwhile, in the abyss the guard pressed his tongue into the hollow of Petra's throat. He liked the texture of her skin just there, the vulnerability she offered him, allowed him to see. Small sounds escaped her lips and her body couldn't keep still. The small hard nubs of her breasts begged silently for his touch. He obliged happily, stoking one nipple with his thumb. A sound close to a whimper left Petra's lips. Her legs parted and, as far as the position would allow, she tried to grind her mound against his leg, only to have Ryanac chuckle.

"Bastard."

In the abyss, Markis echoed the sentiment. The Ryanac of then and now ignored both Markis and Petra, both versions of him too lost in caressing her breasts. He still longed to taste her. Even in reality now, Ryanac slid his tongue back and forth inside his own mouth as in the memory he ran a tongue over one of her nipples. The combined sensations struck Markis like a physical blow. He sagged, and Ryanac's strength kept his living body from falling.

Markis shook, moving his hands, clawing, digging in his nails. Through the connection, the feel of them against Ryanac's back bowed his spine, making Markis duplicate the movement. His nails hurt, but they only heightened the pleasure.

*See what I told you about pain.*

The woman filing Uly's nails finished and left. Ryanac told Uly to go next door to look at the horses.

"I have need of you."

"I know."

"Do you?" Petra leaned back a little. "You say you do and every time you say it, you lower your voice in such a way it makes me believe you, or want to. Then afterwards you change."

"I don't mean to."

In the present, Markis's thundering heartbeat calmed. Ryanac's tone caught his attention. In memory, they both looked up into her eyes. There came a sense of Ryanac having to drag his gaze upward to do it. On the way, he passed over the sight of her breasts, but he pushed the image back. A hard knot formed in his throat. "Petra, don't do this," he whispered. "You know I feel for you."

"Yet there will always be Shavar."

"What would you have me do?" His fingers played lightly at her sides as they talked. "I have my duty."

Her hand reached up and touched his face. "Just duty? Does this duty mean no one else in your life for you?"

"Would you leave your brother?" He said it with a sense of urgency, aware Uly would have made his way into the stable next door by now. The wooden wall had more than one break, but the largest was difficult to miss and showed a fine view of the worktable where they currently leaned. Ryanac wanted to share this with Uly for good reason, but there were some things he didn't want to share with anyone. He didn't want Uly to hear this part of their conversation.

Petra's gaze slid away. He said nothing, but tightened his grip a little. So did she. "You could ask to continue your posting here even after he leaves. He would let you." Her words sounded empty. Yes, Markis would allow it...

SO CERTAIN?

Instead of shared amusement, Markis felt a stab of pain. He couldn't contain his surprise or puzzlement at Ryanac's reaction.

Ryanac wasn't going anywhere. Just as Petra would not leave her brother, Ryanac would not leave Markis.

"Do you really want to talk about this now? I want me some pussy."

Petra glared. She obviously hated the local expression. Her face calmed. Now showing mild irritation, she answered, "Only after I get to touch some cock." She made it sound a saucy and exciting offer, but underneath it, Ryanac had learned from experience that it hid some sadness.

Her hands were already moving down to his groin, however, and although he opened his mouth to express his emotions, Petra narrowed her gaze. Her hand slid, cradled, and squeezed. He couldn't help it. His hands joined hers moving over his growing need. Together, they unfastened his uniform and let his cock out of the restriction. He couldn't help the sigh that escaped his lips. It hadn't been intentional, though the sounds he made always turned Petra on.

THEY TURN ME ON TOO.

*I know.*

Markis hadn't meant to project that thought either. He waited to blush, but as they hovered around each other's emotions, he finally gave in and shared the guard's amusement.

Her hand stroked his flesh now and Ryanac became lost in the sensation, pushing thoughts of his problems, his responsibilities, his duty, Uly, and even Markis aside. On a basic level, he even forgot about Petra. He held on to the emotion of loving her, wanting to bring her pleasure. Part of her pleasure she took in watching him react to her. He did what his body wanted, throwing back his head, squeezing his eyes shut to the world so it became darkness and sensation. His body twitched, tightened where no one could see. Internal organs beat faster or expanded and squeezed depending on their function, but all reacted to her. A sudden longing to see her as lost to passion as he was made Ryanac open his eyes. He watched her take the moisture from the tip of his cock to her mouth and suck it from her

thumb, all the while staring him in the eyes. The slightest of smiles touched her lips as she did, but her eyes danced in pure mischief.

No way would he allow her to get away with that. He grabbed her around the waist and dumped her onto the workbench without ceremony, hard, making her bounce a little on the unrelenting surface. Her squeal of protest made him want to growl like an animal. While Petra complained about the possibility of splinters and Ryanac told her to consider a little pain to spice the pleasure, Markis sighed.

THERE'S NO STOPPING YOU WITH THIS PAIN THING. He said it to disguise the sudden interest that washed over him, but it didn't work. Damn! Well, he was the one who invited Ryanac to share minds. Of course, now Ryanac knew he was cursing, knew everything he felt and thought right now. His mind and the stars started to spiral.

STOP! In the abyss, Markis mentally pressed his fingers against his head. IS THERE MUCH MORE OF THIS?

*Not too much.*

Unfastening garments, drawing her underthings aside, Ryanac's fingers met a silky wet heat. He had no trouble slipping two fingers inside of her. The smell of her arousal rose up between them, flooding his mouth with saliva. Not for the first time, one instruction burned brightly in his mind. He wanted to taste her. The act of crouching down left his cock hanging out, vulnerable. It was an odd feeling, but the scent of her musk overrode a man's natural caution. Of course, if his cock had truly felt threatened it might have been different. He didn't plan to have it hanging in the wind for long. She was so slick he could have already plunged into her, could be riding her to the stars, but the one thing Petra loved and could never get enough of was his tongue. He opened her wider, staring into her sex.

RYANAC! Markis couldn't hide his sense of unease and didn't try. This wouldn't have bothered him if the woman was willing, but this felt immoral.

*Stay with me. Please.*

The please took Markis by surprise. Ryanac felt a little hurt that it did, then disregarded the emotion.

He gave Petra a soft, almost tentative lick, aware what it would do to her. A sound escaped her, then another in time with his licks. He lapped up the side of one soft fold, then down the other. This always drove her so crazy she sometimes forgot herself; she often forgot he needed to breathe. He kept her legs apart with one side of his head and one hand. The other hand went to his lonesome cock. By the time he slid his tongue into her centre, it was difficult to tell where his spit ended and her moisture began. He would have liked to continue this for a while. He liked to bring Petra to orgasm, then take her before the pleasure subsided. He drew her clit forward with a suck of his lips then caught it gently between his teeth.

Petra's hands at once slapped at him. "Don't. We don't have time. I'll come and I want you inside me when I do."

He stood, Petra clutching at him, dragging his mouth to hers. His cock and tongue pierced her at either end. She moaned into his mouth, drawing his body closer with her hands and her legs. She rocked her hips so that his body stroked her where she needed it most. From this angle, she had to work hard for her pleasure. Ryanac chuckled to see the desperation in her eyes. He slipped his hand under her legs to help her.

“What about those splinters?”

He heard Petra say something about making him suck them out, but she also squeezed him at the same time. Her internal muscles squeezed and clenched, milking him. Ryanac swore. The feeling was just too delicious. He struggled to regain control, but Petra had him and, as always, she knew it. He didn't have to look into her eyes to see the inner light that brightened them. Her legs looping around his hips changed his mind. He tried to pull back, but she clung on. This was madness; he was the stronger one, but Petra had strength where you couldn't see it. She set the pace, made him thrust in time with her needs. He tried to struggle out of her grasp, but somewhere in the back of his mind the thought existed that Uly watched this. If he broke free with too much aggression, that's all Uly would see -- an act of violence when it was just the opposite. Even if Uly had not been watching, he struggled against the ebb and flow. Every time Ryanac pulled back, determined to break the connection, her legs tugged him in again. His cock felt the start of the plunge into that warm, slick heat; his brain gave up, and his body followed it through. He didn't even really know why he fought it, but he was captain of the guard and surely, he should have a little decorum.

Markis's amused hysteria swirled through the abyss. Ryanac's consternation followed it.

In his memory, Ryanac managed to say “Bitch!” It came out strained with frustration and desire. He hadn't meant to come as soon as this, but all too easily she drove him to the brink. He gritted his teeth, afraid he wouldn't be able to stand the sheer acuity of it otherwise. He began to spill, locking the intensity of it behind his teeth, behind his eyes. Petra wasn't a woman who liked a man leaving her in his wake. She slipped further off the edge of the table, rocking her hips, rubbing her sensitised flesh against him and he held her weight while she did. She reached the peak when her hands fluttered around him, then grabbed. Burying her face against him, she cried out as she always did. Sometimes there were tears. Ryanac feared this time the tears might be for other reasons than just passion.

He held her, stroked her, as he always did. His hands and lips wandered over her, finally kissing her closed eyes. He licked the few drops of salty moisture that leaked from the corners.

Markis was about to ask why Ryanac had wanted him to see them together when suddenly Ryanac provided the answer. Other images fluttered through the abyss. There was Petra, several years younger when Ryanac had first set eyes on her. Markis witnessed their first kiss. He saw her leaning over him through Ryanac's eyes, after they had made love for

the first time and she trailed a flower he had picked from the riverbank over him to tickle at his sides. He saw Petra showing Ryanac her nephew, and later, her niece, and felt Ryanac's polite smile that hid weariness behind it. He sensed Ryanac's regret.

Drawing them out of the abyss, Markis looked into his friend's eyes. "Would you have married her?"

Ryanac shook his head, then sighed. "I don't know. Another time, another place." They still stood naked, face-to-face, chest-to-chest, groin-to-groin. Markis stepped back. He sat down on the pallet. It took a moment for Ryanac to join him.

"Tell me," Markis said.

"I could have shown you."

"Why do I have the feeling that you would have found showing me easier? I want you to tell me."

Ryanac sat with his knees bent, his legs out in front of him and his arms leaning on his knees. He dropped his head. "You can be harsh at the strangest of times. It's what will help make you a good leader." He sighed again, then looked up to meet Markis's gaze. "Before we left, Petra asked me to father her child."

Markis blinked. That he hadn't expected. "Do you want to?"

It appeared as if the man considered it. "I don't know. Yes. No." He looked up again. "You asked if I would marry her. You caught the gist of the conversation. It wasn't the first time we had discussed it and it wasn't the last."

Nodding, Markis thought over what he knew of Petra's past. In truth, the woman might never have come to his attention if it weren't for the fact that she and Ryanac were what the Swithin called passionate lovers. The term referred to people who formed an attachment that would last a long time, maybe a lifetime, yet it would never become anything more. If one of them married and put an end to the physical union, they would likely remain friends. Petra had spent a few nights in Ryanac's room. At the time, whom Ryanac had sex with was the man's own business, but he sought permission for any he brought to Shavar's private wing. When the Swithin had conquered the territory and built the palace as a base to oversee the development of the surrounding area, Petra's brother was one of many skilled artisans. He had brought his immediate family with him, who then consisted of his wife and sister. The couple had since had two children who took to Petra like a second mother. While this type of family support was not uncommon in their culture, Petra clearly now wanted a child of her own.

"She's asking for your child, not marriage?" Markis wanted to be sure that he understood. Ryanac nodded.

While there was no shame in this, it was less common. The Swithin had children as much as possible out of love. As a race, there were very few unplanned pregnancies. To accuse one of them of not caring for a child was a most grievous insult. They took the

responsibility of creating life very seriously. Markis looked into Ryanac's eyes. "Would you marry her? Would she want you?"

There was no mistaking the hesitation. "Another time, another place, maybe. Probably. Yes." Ryanac turned his head. "She won't leave her brother. She won't leave his children. They are a true family. She doesn't want to give that up."

"I could...transfer you." The pain threatened to close his throat even as he said it. It hurt, but if it was what Ryanac wanted... Markis swallowed, fearing the lump bruising his throat would never ease.

The guard's eyes widened in something akin to horror. "Don't say that, not even in jest or error. I love Petra, but not the way I love you." The harsh expression on his face broke up and a soft laugh followed. "Not even the way I love Uly."

"Tressa?" Markis needed to ask. Thankfully, the lump in his throat started to dissipate.

"I like her and admire her. I care for her. I don't love her even half as much as I do Petra, but maybe one day. In the meantime, she'll be your queen and I will look after her as if she was my own."

"Which she is. What's mine is yours." To his dismay, the other man shook his head.

"I'm your guard. I can't be Samir to you even if you are to me. You can't have two."

"Maybe you are more Samir to me than Uly."

Another shake of the head showed the guard clearly disagreed. "He is your first true love."

"I've always loved you."

"That's different."

"You're right, it is, but that doesn't make it any less."

Looking tired of the argument, the large man shrugged. "Even so, my duty doesn't allow it. I'm your guard. Your bodyguard shouldn't be your lover."

Markis laughed. "There's no rule against it. It's just considered ill-advised. You think no one knows?"

"They know we have sex. That's not the same thing and you know it. We're talking about a deeper commitment and some hate me for it."

"Very few, and those that do, generally their opinions aren't ones I care for anyway. As for the other, your duty is whatever I say it is." It became Ryanac's turn to blink. "Ryanac, we formed a family of our own a few nights ago."

A wry grin played about the big man's lips and it was good to see it there. "I suppose we did."

"Which still leaves the question of Petra."

Ryanac stared blankly. "I can't and won't leave you, and Petra won't leave her brother." Ryanac ran a hand through his hair. The gesture spoke of frustration but made the



hair fall forward down one side of his face and body. To Markis's horror, he wanted to wrap it around himself. He looked away, afraid Ryanac would notice the almost overwhelming desire on his face. "Markis, I don't think I can do it. I don't want to refuse her, but I can't give Petra a child I'll hardly ever see. I wouldn't be able to rest knowing it's out there. Besides, if I ever father a child, I want it brought up where we grew up. I want to be able to take it to the farm so my mother can fuss over it."

"You told her no." He waited for Ryanac's nod, even though he didn't need to. "You already made the decision. Why tell me?"

"Selfishness, perhaps. I don't like regrets even if I know I've done the right thing. Growing up, I used to think being Swithin was a cure for everything, but it isn't."

"We do better than most." Markis received a smile for the comment. "I could move the entire family."

"Her brother likes his work. I think the time for Petra and me has passed. She'll find a good man and she'll have her child. That's not what's bothering me."

"You're sad it can't be you."

The light laugh was self-deprecating. "Bet you didn't know I was such a soft touch."

"Of course I did." Markis couldn't help it. He kept his laughter quiet, but it shook his body. Ryanac frowned at him, but it wasn't a serious look. "As long as you're sure about the decision."

"I'm sure. I can't explain why I wanted you to know, but I'm sure. Besides, even if they returned to our homeland, we can't have that much of an extended family. It would be ridiculous."

True. Besides, even being Swithin, there were limits on the number of people Markis wanted in his life intimately.

Coldness stroked his spine and he turned his head to see Ryanac staring at him, eyes wide. They weren't in the abyss, there was no link, and yet he projected the thought when he hadn't meant to. Markis could feel Ryanac wasn't surprised or afraid of what happened, but startled by the thought itself.

"Don't worry, you don't have full control." Ryanac must have seen the consternation on Markis's face.

"I'm glad you're so certain that's all it was."

"Would it be such a bad thing if you found you were linked with me?"

"Let's just say it's been a strange experience, living through your eyes, seeing myself the way you do."

Ryanac chuckled. "*Been* a strange experience?" He caught Markis's hand in his. "There's plenty of our lives to share yet."

"I know, but I don't have the sense of urgency I once did. I'm looking forward to living out the rest of our lives as well as occasionally re-living it, but like sex, now I know it should happen, as and when."

"Good analogy."

"Glad you approve."

"Personally, I'm still looking forward to the sexual overload of doing it for real while inside each other's minds."

Markis hesitated. "When I've more control. When we have proper baths and beds, and a quiet evening."

"When will we get those?"

"We'll have them. I'll make it my first decree as king. After a certain time of night, no one is to disturb us unless the enemy is at the gates."

Ryanac laughed, but he sounded extremely pleased.

## Chapter Fourteen

How did one knock on a tent? Uly felt foolish even thinking it, then he did the only thing he could. He called out. The old maid lifted the flap. Her eyes looked dark in their sockets, but Uly couldn't be sure if it was from strain or merely a shadow falling across her face. Maybe it was a combination of the two. Her mouth set in a hard grimace, drawing his eye to the fine lines encircling her mouth. Likely, this woman maintained such a look on her face for most of her life.

"It is all right, Idelle," Tressa called out. Clearly not liking it, still the old woman stepped to one side. Uly went into the tent.

"I've brought you food," he said.

"Could not one of the women have done that?"

"Idelle, that is enough." Tressa spoke quietly but forcefully. She stood straight in a dress too thick for the weather, her hands clasped in front of her. Uly took the food to the makeshift table, then carried Tressa's plate over to her. "I do not think I could eat," she said.

"You need your strength. I don't mean..." He stopped talking when her gaze turned on him. He looked down. "I don't mean because of that, but because of the journey." He lifted his eyes, but not his head. "Why won't you let Markis help with the pain?"

"It is...complicated." She took a deep breath, sat down as though she needed the support, and then continued. "We are brought up not to talk of these things with men. There must be things in your culture that you do not discuss out loud."

Uly laughed, going to his knees in front of her. "There are many things, like the fact men lie with men or women with women, but it's not something to speak of. Everyone just pretends it doesn't happen." The sound of a spoon scraping a plate clean came from the other side of the tent. Clearly, Idelle had no qualms about eating.

A small frown touched Tressa's face. "In my homeland we women have nothing to do with what goes on with men. Men can do what they wish, but if two women turn to each other, as they have in search of comfort they cannot get from the men, they see it as a great sin. I have never seen the truth of this, only heard rumour of it happening. I cannot imagine...being with another woman, but I have my doubts over this idea of sin. I have always believed this was how the men of our race tried to control the women by dictating to them."

"Makes sense," Uly agreed. Her gaze studied his face. He had the sense to know there was something she wanted to ask him. He raised his eyebrows in invitation.

"Why did you choose a man?"

He blinked twice in rapid succession and then gave a half laugh. "I didn't exactly choose. It's more like he chose me, or we chose each other, or something else decided for us."

"Yet you must have known. There had to be a time when you knew you wanted him, or did he--"

"No." Uly interrupted her. "He never forced me. I wanted him long before he took me to his bed." Her expression spoke for her. Letting out a sigh, he searched for a way to explain. "I've never known anyone like him. Even on the streets, you see noblemen. Markis was unlike any of them. He puzzled me, intrigued me. I've seen him stand up to men that frighten me just with the look in their eyes. I know he has the comet behind him, but it isn't that. He would stand up to them anyway. He does what he feels is right even if others don't like it. I like women. I didn't consciously choose. I just..." He stopped speaking, afraid of what he had been about to say. "I didn't even think about being with a woman or a man. I had other concerns. Sex was a brief desire, to satisfy quickly or dismiss. Either that, or a means to an end."

"You sold yourself?"

Unsure if she would be disgusted with him, he dropped his gaze. "More than I wanted, less than most would believe. It wasn't even the coin I wanted, though the food I bought with it was welcome. I wanted the companionship." When he looked up, he was surprised to see a small smile on her lips. The warmth in it touched her eyes as well.

She reached out for the plate and Uly watched her eat a few bites before she set it down again. At least she ate something, though he believed she did it only to please him. She swallowed as if even that took more effort than she could afford. The look on her face was almost apologetic. "I have heard we Azulite women suffer more than most races. I do not think I can eat another thing. I feel a little ill, but mostly tired."

"Then lie down and sleep." Uly stood up and reached for her hand. She looked at it as though surprised. "I'll help you with your dress." From the other side of the tent, Idelle let out a strangled gasp. A mischievous smile spread over Tressa's face, despite how wan she looked.

"Would you lie down with me?"

Uly nodded and ignored the moan of protest at his back. Tressa stood and he pulled at the fastenings at her back. "Why are you wearing this thing? The Swithin have better designed dresses." Tressa hadn't been able to bring her wardrobe with her so he could only guess that Markis had arranged to have a few Azulite garments prepared for her in advance.

"Those things are not dresses." The maid still protested.

"They allow a woman to breathe, at least," Uly said. To his pleasure, Tressa giggled.

"My lady, please. You cannot lie with this youth."

"I only intend to sleep. Besides, I have had him inside me before now."

Clearly, the maid thought this was bad enough, but she obviously thought this was something worse. "My lady, it is bad enough you have to do these things to please the prince, but you bleed. You cannot lie beside a man. You should not even be talking to him."

The small shoulders under his hands slumped. "Idelle, I am sorry you feel this way, but I did not couple with Uly to please anyone other than myself, and as for the rest" -- her hands fluttered about ineffectually in the air -- "I give up. Maybe Markis is right, and I am being stupid. I will wait this out and see what their healers have to say before I take anything, but next month I will try what they suggest. If I feel my nation so backward in other things, why can they not be backward in this? Leave us. Go to bed."

The maid opened and closed her mouth like a gasping fish, then set her lips in that unforgiving pose and hustled off toward the back of the tent. Tressa lay down and Uly pulled off a few of his rougher garments before settling against her back.

"You do not really want me, do you?" Despite her light tone, Tressa sounded agitated.

"It's not that. I want Markis more. We haven't had much time together."

"Yet you rush off each day."

"That started because I wanted you and Markis to work things out. I hate the two of you arguing. It drives me crazy to hear you. Now, I enjoy making some new friends. I enjoy what I am learning. I have the evenings with him to look forward to."

"The sex?"

"No. Not just that. I like watching him sleep."

"You would rather be with him right now."

"Not right now. Right now, I want you to fall asleep, and if my being here helps, then I'm happy."

"Tell me, do you consider an orgasm with me wasted?"

Her sudden question made his heart stutter. Uly hesitated, and then decided to tell her the truth. "I am happy to be your lover if that is what you wish or need. I find no displeasure in it." He trailed a hand up her side to the underswell of her breast. "For a short time the other night, I lay in your arms at peace. You gave me something I'd never had with a

woman. I like the feel of you and the sight of you, and I will share pleasure with you, but you cannot have my heart in this. I like you. I don't love you, though, not like that."

She patted his hand. "I know. Markis feels for me a little better, I think." She turned her head to him. "You do understand why we are wed? Markis will need an heir. I need my freedom, or as much as any queen can have. I found the right man for that. There are many levels of love. One of those comes close to respect."

"I've more than respect for you, Tressa," Uly said, and watched a smile spread slowly over her face.

"Tell me," Tressa whispered, her voice growing sleepy. "Did Markis send you here?"

"No. Ryanac did. Markis protested, but gave up the argument. He wants me in his tent, but I think the protest was more in fear of what you might do."

"What did Markis say you should do if we had fought you off?"

"He said if either of those she-demons tries to gouge out your eyes, you have my permission to stab them."

She opened her eyes. "You have a knife on you?"

Uly reached under the cushion where he had set the blade and pulled out the knife. Tressa stared at it a moment then said, "I have never seen one that big before."

The small princess surely felt better if her sense of humour had returned.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that night, Markis looked into the tent. In the back, the old maid slept with her head back, her mouth open, snoring gently. On the pallet, Uly and Tressa lay together, the young man curled around her back. His hand caressed her stomach, probably providing a welcome heat. Markis shook his head. "How did you know?" he whispered to the man who stood by his side.

"A lucky guess," Ryanac chided. Markis shook his head until the other man shrugged. "Uly is less of a threat to her."

"You think I've been threatening to her?"

"She's left a life she didn't want for a life she doesn't know. How would you feel?"

"Maybe a bit more grateful." Markis wasn't sure he meant it, but so far all Tressa had done was tire him out. He let the tent flap fall. Things would get better. They had to, surely.

## Chapter Fifteen

“You’re going to spend *another* day with Antal?”

Uly couldn’t be sure if it was his imagination, but the prince sounded displeased with that. Rather than apologise, he simply nodded. If Markis had a problem with it, he could speak up. “I’ll be back tonight.”

It rather looked as if Markis would argue. Then his gaze went to Tressa. They could hear the hustle and bustle as the camp got underway. “Before they break down this tent, I want a word with you,” Markis told her. Uly stood up and Markis’s gaze flickered instantly to his face. “Stay. You may as well hear this too.” Uly nodded but remained on his feet. Markis paced, arms folded across his chest.

“I’m not sure I’ve quite explained the Swithin way to you.” He stopped, turned, and looked at Tressa where she sat. “I told you the other day we can create life together.”

A small frown touched her face. She gave an equally small nod. “This is precious to you. I understand.”

“It is, but I have to wonder if you believe that is why we revere sex.”

Her frown increased. Uly could feel his face begin to tighten along with hers. He had never heard Markis describe it quite that way before, but to say the Swithin revered sex threw their relationships under a sudden, gleaming light.

“Tressa, you’ve been brought up by a race that treats sex as a sin to further the man’s needs. Uly, your life has shown you that sex is a commodity to sell or use as a bribe, one that hurts the seller rather than the person who does the purchasing. Both notions could have made you victims, but you are stronger than that. In many ways, you and Tressa have much in common.”

He would have liked to deny it, but Uly could see the sense of Markis’s words. The way Tressa lowered her gaze said she did as well.

"We Swithin revere sex for it is the perfect union. It creates life and that is a miraculous thing." Markis moved to stand in front of the princess. "However, my union with Uly would produce no child, so in many eyes that refutes the argument."

A twinge tightened things inside Uly. It was strange how an emotion could produce an almost physical pain. He sensed Markis's gaze on his face and looked up into the other man's eyes.

"We Swithin regard sex as something greater than a physical union." The prince paced again, glanced from one to the other's face. "We believe in a pure moment when two people, if they can achieve a joint orgasm, should look into each other's eyes. We believe, in that moment, all barriers between them drop and they can see each other for who they truly are. I'm not so sure I have that much belief in the power of sex, but I do know how I would feel to love someone and not be able to touch them."

He stopped pacing again. "I've given you both the idea that we are so open about sex that you may believe you'll see people rutting in the streets or doorways when you reach the city."

Uly blinked. He had never considered any such thing. From the slight flush in Tressa's face, apparently she had. The expression Markis pulled said the prince had thought as much, and found it irritating.

"Disappointed?" the prince asked Tressa. "It's all rumours, ignorance, and lies. The truth is, although we are free and open regarding sex, we have fewer partners during our lives than many races. For most, they can count the number of sexual partners they have in their lifetime on one hand. For most," he repeated, casting his gaze toward the entrance. The prince didn't have to say his guard's name. Uly struggled not to laugh.

"Keep these things in mind, and if you're unsure on anything I want you to ask me." It seemed the prince said this last mostly for Tressa's benefit. Uly made a small movement that drew Markis's gaze. They stared at each other, Uly now aware that Markis knew he was impatient to be on his way. The other man parted his lips as though he might speak, then gave a small shake of his head. "You'd better get going," he said.

When they should have felt close, Uly just felt alone. Certain the prince felt it too, Uly wanted to explain his need to be away, but he wasn't sure he could. He wanted to tell Markis how different he felt, but he didn't have the words. He could only hope time would either provide the words, or remove the need for them.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What do you think?"

The horse rolled under him with a gentle, swaying movement. The young man asking the question rode at his side. Aware of Antal's gaze on him, still Uly allowed the smile to spread over his face. He didn't know why he even considered trying to conceal it. On the



street, he had learned to hide his feelings and yet, according to Markis and Ryanac, he wore every emotion on his sleeve. If he hadn't an almost natural light-fingered ability, he probably wouldn't have survived. Then, of course, there was the nagging question of destiny. He had luck. It might not always feel like it at times, but he couldn't deny it. He escaped danger more often than not on chance.

The reason for the smile spread out before him. They had cleared the pass a short while ago and the immediate difference Uly noticed was in the texture of the sand. The sand here looked pale, almost golden. He stared down at it. Antal laughed, and leaning to the side, reached out to tease his hair.

"The colour matches," he said.

Heat rose to Uly's face. For one thing, to touch one another's hair was an intimate gesture for the Swithin. Unless someone was grooming you for practical purposes, one only touched another person's hair if they were close. He'd known Antal for over a week, but surely not enough time had passed for them to be that close and they could never be intimate. He loved Markis. Maybe Antal didn't mean anything by it. The touch had been a casual one. "I hadn't noticed," Uly said, mumbling to cover his embarrassment.

Antal winked. "I'm sure Shavar has."

Not knowing what to say, Uly looked off into the distance. The passage not only opened to paler sand, it contained some foliage. Large fern-like plants spread numerous emerald-green leaves, rising up from thick woody stems that resembled pinecones. Some were tall and straight. Some were thick and fat. For a reason Uly didn't want to contemplate, more heat filled his face, and even his extremities. "I didn't know plants such as these could grow in sand," he said, trying to choose a subject.

"You'll see more varieties than this as we approach the city. Wait until morning. The sky will be so blue." It didn't take a genius to know Antal was glad to be nearing home. He looked across at Uly suddenly. "I can't wait for you to see it." The look on his face was of a man proud of his race, his homeland, but something else existed in it.

Maybe Uly was better at hiding things in his expression than Markis thought, or maybe he was finally getting the hang of it, for Antal didn't seem to notice his unease. He liked Antal, but the guard couldn't be anything more to him. Then again, maybe he was just reading too much into their growing friendship. He didn't entirely understand the Swithin way yet, and he wouldn't be surprised if he never did. That didn't mean he didn't like it. Looking up, Uly blinked into the sun just before the towering side of the cliff hid it from view. For a moment, he thought he saw someone up there, but when he looked again, a large bird detached itself from the rocks and soared into the sky. The sight of the bird in flight took much of his anxiety with it as it flew away.

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"You can stay to swim, then eat with us, can't you?"

Uly hesitated. "I don't know how to swim," he confessed. "You don't swim if you can help it where I come from."

For once, he clearly took Antal by surprise. "Our lands have many lakes and rivers. It really is advisable to learn. Come, watch us, and then I'll give you a lesson."

Uly dithered. The sudden good feeling that enveloped him earlier at the sight of the bird had eased whatever troubled him. He wanted to spend the night with Markis and knew the prince awaited his return, but there was no reason he could not spare an hour or two. The afternoon had not yet given way to evening. Glad to be in Swithin territory, they broke the march at the first water source. The river was long and winding, and during the course of the evening most of the regiment would take the opportunity to bathe. Uly agreed to the suggestion, yet when they got to the edge of the river he looked around in dismay. All the men stripped off so calmly.

"Come on," Antal said with a jerk of his head, but Uly couldn't do it.

"I'll feel stupid," Uly admitted in a small voice. He didn't know where to look. The casual nudity should have made it easier, but it didn't.

Antal, already making lazy turns in the water, kicked a little closer to the bank. Uly caught a glimpse of naked flesh under the rippling surface. "You'll feel even more stupid if you don't join in. I promise not to let you drown."

He saw the sense of Antal's words as more of the young men left their clothes in discarded heaps and waded in, talking, laughing, shouting, splashing each other. "What's wrong with him?" one of Antal's group shouted. Aware *he* was the one in question, Uly hoped the heat in his face didn't show.

"He can't swim," Antal shouted back. Uly stared in alarm that his friend told them such a thing. Better they think that was the reason rather than embarrassment, though. Shouts of "Come on in," and more promises not to let him drown came from all directions. Antal waded closer and stood up. Lifting his arms, he combed his hair back over his head with his fingers. Like many of the men, he had quickly taken down his braid so he could wash his hair. The movement made the muscles ripple down his sides, but he seemed unconscious of it. The river hid him from the waist down. Water streamed down the rest of his body. He held his hands out to Uly. "Come on," he said gently. "You're worrying about nothing."

Nothing? He moved to strip, though. The other young men went back to playing. They made lustful groaning sounds although the noises were unrelated to sex and everything to do with getting clean. Antal just stood there watching him while he stripped. When Uly finally stood there naked, he looked into Antal's amber brown eyes. A smile softened Antal's face, yet those eyes danced with amusement and many other things. They watched his face now, but had swept over his body as he undressed. The young guard crossed his arms while he waited but now he held his hands out again. "Come to me," he said. "You'll like it."

Not certain of his meaning, still the words had their effect. The blush showed; there was no doubt of it. Uly hurried into the water to hide his blush and other things, but almost wished he hadn't. For one, the sudden proximity of Antal and the feel of the water made him moan. The river looked cold but it had spent a day under the sun's heat. Right now, the temperature was just right and blissfully cool.

"Told you," Antal said, smiling. Suddenly, other hands were upon him. Uly just had time to draw in a breath when the other young men took him into and under the water. He came up spluttering to the sound of their laughter.

"Let's get you clean."

Hands roamed over him, some of them embarrassing. Uly glanced around, his mouth open, thinking to protest. He couldn't push them away. His feet no longer touched the bottom. He'd sink. Antal came up behind him as some of the men rubbed their hands over his chest and under his arms. Their fingers felt strangely slick.

"It's a type of soap that won't contaminate the river. Relax. Enjoy it," Antal spoke into his ear. The comforting presence moved away from him, and Uly cast his gaze at the other men, most of whom he now recognised even if he couldn't yet put names to the faces. Strangely, he sensed Antal's return before he felt his touch. The other men helped tip him back. He smothered a gasp as they dipped his head back into the water. As he rose up, Antal's fingers worked through the strands of hair into his scalp.

"Usually," Antal said, while his hands were busy, "one would ask to do this, but as you can't swim, I hope you'll allow me the liberty. It'll be easier to have me wash your hair than you trying to do it." Laughter surrounded them but, for a brief moment, Uly was oblivious. The fingers moved against his scalp, working in the cleanser, lightly scratching. The sensation felt so good he even closed his eyes and floated. He was almost disappointed as they tipped him back to rinse.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'll support you."

"You won't take your hand away?"

Antal's soft laugh came in answer. "For the hundredth time, I promise." The young man had taken them a little further downstream away from the main activity so Uly would not be so embarrassed over his first efforts at trying to swim.

"I'll never get the hang of this," Uly complained, just before he swallowed more of the river. It was a good thing it was clean enough for drinking.

"You're doing better than you think."

"Really?" Uly turned in surprise, causing Antal to let go. The move was accidental, and Antal quickly brought him back to the surface, holding him while he coughed and spluttered. "Damn it!"

His curse caused more merriment. "I hear the Simeon have worse curse words than that. I hear what some of them mean, too." Uly didn't have to guess which word. It was Ryanac's favourite. Antal trod water while Uly hung on to him. It left him no choice but to rest his arms around Antal's neck and cling. He glanced towards the bank.

"I guess I should be going." He would have to make his way back to Markis soon.

"I suppose." Still, Antal made no move to help him leave. Uly gave him a questioning glance, which only made Antal smile. "What will you do if I don't take you back yet?"

The words created a strange tingle within him. "You can't tread water all night."

"No, but I can for awhile yet." Antal rolled in the water, taking Uly with him. It meant their bodies touched and glided together while the water stroked them. When they became still again, their faces were closer. Their eyes moved back and forth, their gazes searching. When Antal tipped his head a little to one side and leaned in, Uly did nothing to stop him. He closed his eyes as their lips brushed.

"I can't." Uly pulled back, then clung on as the current tugged at him. He hadn't tried to hide the disappointment in his voice and didn't know whether to feel grateful when Antal evidently heard it.

"You want to."

He did, but he didn't. "I do and I don't." Uly kept his gaze averted, knowing that Antal watched him.

"Uly, for the Swithin, a kiss can mean many things. It can and does mean sex, but it doesn't have to."

Frowning, Uly looked back. It seemed he was about to get yet another lesson in the Swithin way of doing things.

"A kiss also seals friendship. A particularly close kind of friendship, I grant you, but friendship nonetheless. If someone hadn't already taken possession of your heart, we could also share pleasure, and it would not have to mean anything more than this. We still could, but only if you had spoken to and agreed on this with your partner. But we can kiss."

It certainly sounded like something Ryanac would tell him, and he had no reason to disbelieve Antal, yet... "Where I come from it's one man, one woman."

"They stick to that, do they? Live happily?"

If they hadn't been floating in the middle of a river, Uly might have pushed Antal away. As it was, he wanted to thump him. Antal must have seen his annoyance in his face.

"I'm not mocking you. I'm just telling you our way might not always be perfect, but it's no worse. The fact that there are few restrictions often makes us more faithful than you might believe. We can have casual sex, but we do it less often than you might think." That echoed what Markis said. "When we reach the city, you'll find there are many marriages of just two people. Sometimes there are three. More than that...is unusual." Antal grinned, lowering his voice for no reason Uly could see. "We all know the four of you are lovers. We

all knew what was going on in the tent when you brought the princess back. We might not all have known it that night, but a few did, and it got around in a matter of days.”

Blushing. He was definitely blushing. With his eyes now tightly closed, Uly didn't see Antal dip his head; he just knew he must have when he felt Antal's lips when they touched his face. “Uly,” Antal whispered close to his ear. “I could get hard for you in an instant, but that's not what I ask of you. I wouldn't even want it unless you wanted it too.”

His eyes gradually fluttered open. The look in those amber eyes matched the sincerity of the voice. Still, Uly hesitated. “Most friends don't kiss like that where I come from.”

“Hmm,” the other man mused. “From what you've said, you are happy to be away from there.” They floated for a moment, studying each other, and then Antal said, “I'll take you to the bank.” He made a move to the side and Uly tensed, causing his friend to stop and wait. He looked from Antal's eyes, to his lips, and back. He moved in. They kissed.

At first, the pressure remained light. Then, as Antal parted his lips slightly as though seeking permission, Uly opened his mouth to receive the other man's tongue. He waited for a familiar curl of desire and it existed, but it was far lighter than what he felt for Markis. He cared for Markis so much he would...die? *Would I die for him?* With shock, he suddenly knew he would. Markis, he loved. He also cared for Ryanac. What he felt for Antal was also a type of love. A strange Swithin prophecy referred to green bile. Many interpreted this as envy. Who or what was supposed to be envious was undecided, yet in another paragraph, the same prophecy contained the most beautiful line in it, which was why it stuck in his memory. It spoke of the secret of the universe and said the brightest stars were not the ones you saw in the evening, but those that lit up your day as well as your night. Uly sensed its meaning and so hesitated to look at its translation. When he did, it was so close to his own interpretation, it still warmed him. It made the city they headed to feel like home even if he had never seen it. Antal was one of those stars.

He returned the kiss deeper, letting their tongues swirl and dance, resisting the urge to grin, as his mouth was too busy, when he felt Antal stiffen slightly in what had to be surprise, and then give in to the kiss. It lasted, timeless. They broke apart smiling, though Uly was sure his smile must be a little more shy. Antal took them to the bank. Returning to their clothes, they noticed many had left for dinner. The odd bather was some distance apart. Uly stooped to pick up his clothes and then hesitated as he saw Antal return to the edge of the river. He stood there, barely conscious of his nudity as he watched Antal pick up the soap and take it to his hair. Letting his clothes fall back to the ground, Uly approached.

“Would you let me do that?” he asked quietly. Antal's gaze flicked up to him. He hesitated for so long Uly grew convinced he would refuse. Uly was about to apologise when the young man nodded. Slipping into the water, Uly took the bar of cleanser and began to wash Antal's hair.

## Chapter Sixteen

Markis saw Uly enter the tent but was too busy laughing to greet him right away.

"You tried to kill the rooster instead of one of the chickens?"

Previously, a strong sense of Ryanac's mother so angry she was red in the face had haunted him. Markis couldn't help asking what happened. A rather disgruntled Ryanac finally confessed his mother had asked him to kill a chicken for dinner. A look of pain and resignation came over his friend's face.

"I was young. How was I supposed to know there was a bloody difference? All I knew was it kept waking me up in the bloody morning."

From the front of the tent even Uly gave a quiet laugh. Markis glanced at him, then back to the guard. "Would you give us some time?"

Nodding, his friend stood up and left. They had just returned from bathing. He missed Uly at the river and from the look of him he had already bathed. Clearly, Uly noticed him looking.

"I hope you don't mind. I stayed with Antal further down the bank."

It took him a moment to accept it, but then Markis shook his head. "Probably just as well. I wouldn't have been able to keep my hands off you, and washing together would have led to other things. We might be open about sex, but Shavar is supposed to have some self-control."

A slight flush touched Uly's face. The younger man's lips curved into a soft smile that said the comment pleased him, but then it faded again. Clearly, something else troubled him. "What's wrong?"

Walking forward, Uly dropped his things. Dressed only in his light clothes, he crawled onto the pallet and knelt in front of the prince. His gaze was searching, maybe for reassurance, Markis couldn't be sure. Despite Uly's background, an innocent quality always

existed in those eyes as though he saw the world a different way, maybe the way he wanted it to be. In truth, Markis was aware that Uly saw the world for what it was, and the miracle was that it hadn't eradicated his optimism, his hope. Now, his eyes contained a knowledge that spoke of other things.

"I kissed Antal," Uly said suddenly, simply, and although he knew it was the wrong thing to do, Markis flinched. A look of anguish infused Uly's face.

"It's all right," Markis said.

"No, no, it's not."

The sound of Uly's voice, the movements he made, all implied he had done something wrong. Markis took hold of his hands. "I'm not angry with you. I'm not even upset." He paused. "Do you know what a kiss means to the Swithin?"

"Sort of. Antal tried to explain. He said it didn't have to mean sex. I sort of understand because it was nice, but that's all." He glanced at Markis sideways. "It wasn't like kissing you."

Markis gave a soft laugh as he smiled. He stroked Uly's damp hair back from his face. "Poor Uly. You haven't had it easy with me, have you?" As Uly frowned, Markis sighed. "Trying to explain our way to outsiders is a difficulty we've had to face many times. For those of us brought up to live the Swithin way, it feels easy, natural, and we have no problems understanding such things. To be naked in another's presence, to share a bed, would not lead one of the Swithin to assume the relationship involved sex. A kiss is something else, reserved for loved ones or for very close friends, at certain times for family. I kissed my mother on the lips once just hours before she died. Merely a press of lips to say goodbye. A way to say things I could not put into words. Precisely because it was so unusual, she understood."

"You've never mentioned her before."

"Nor have I mentioned the rest of my family. You and I have not been close enough and, since we have, we've not had time." He stroked Uly's face. "I've only been home once in a decade and that was to see her before she died. You would have liked her and she would have liked you. She would have been happy for us."

"And your father, the king?"

"He's...complicated." Uly raised an eye but Markis shook his head. "Let's not discuss that tonight."

"I'm curious and a little...worried, I guess."

That was hardly surprising. Like it or not, Uly would meet the king in a few days. This had been a strange journey for a lowly street thief, and not just in distance.

"I'm not angry you've made a friend. I'm pleased. I..." Markis shook his head. "Jealousy is not the Swithin way, but I want you as though I have an ache in my bones." The admission was difficult, but it was the truth and Uly deserved to know.

Oddly, Uly didn't look what Markis could describe as pleased. Instead, his face grew more serious; his eyes glistened with moisture though he didn't appear to be in tears. "If the king doesn't like me, what will you do?"

Markis laughed. "He does not dictate who I love. You are staying with me. Although..." Markis rested his face against the man's head. "...don't expect him to like you at all. For one thing, he's not even going to pretend to like Tressa."

Obviously startled, Uly moved his head, making Markis lift his chin out of the way. They looked at one another. Again, those eyes searched his face. "You don't get on very well with him, do you?"

The absurdity of his life up until this point, the responsibility, rules, regulations that they dictated he should live by and had never done him any good, suddenly all came home to roost. Markis started to laugh. "That's an understatement," he managed to force out between gasps of merriment.

Ryanac, coming back into the tent with food a few seconds later, shot a perplexed look at Uly as if asking why Shavar was crying with laughter. It only made Markis laugh harder.

\* \* \* \* \*

It would have been a good night for making love but, staring into Uly's face while he slept, Markis didn't have the heart to wake him. If he could have slipped out of the bed without doing so, he might have gone in search of Ryanac.

All the journeys into the abyss were strange; the shared memory they discussed this evening pained him more than most. Before the incident with the chicken, they talked over the moment when Ryanac had first seen him riding the power. He had been down on his knees and naked. The Swithin didn't care about nudity, yet now the idea of those years spent in physical, mental, and emotional torment, in front of a group of wizened old men, burned like bile in his throat. They had tied him as they so often did. Shavar could direct the power through any part of the body. In truth, Markis believed there was no need to use a directing hand, but accepted the fact that it helped. It focused the mind, at least in the beginning. The trouble was, pain could make you thrash around and accidents could happen in a misplaced strike. The old teachings also dictated that Shavar should gain control of the comet before directing it. Oddly, tests proved Markis strong and yet he apparently suffered more than most. Even now, his grasp of the comet felt fragile at times. In some ways, he didn't blame them for tying him in the early sessions. They had no reason to trust him; he hadn't even trusted himself.

So, they tied him, and Ryanac coming in answer to Markis's call had walked in on him naked and bound on his knees. It was also a day they used the lash. Markis turned his mind back to that moment when he had forced his head up, a soft scrape of boots on flagstones announcing the arrival of a newcomer. Pain blurred his vision and age had changed his friend, but still he recognised him. Ryanac had acquired silver streaks in his hair and he had



acquired muscle, but he was still Markis's best friend, and in that moment he was also captain of the guard, the post Markis had just granted him. Knowing firsthand now what Ryanac felt for him, there had been no question of his accepting the post. He hadn't known that then. That day, seeing Ryanac finally before him, after so many years in which their individual duties kept them apart, was both a relief and an agony. Markis cursed the universe for the timing, but now to discover that Ryanac had purposely waited to see him so that he could walk in on a training session...

Lying back on the pallet with Uly cradled in his arms, Markis breathed in the younger man's scent. The smell of his hair freshly washed reminded Markis of grass and cool mountain air. As always, it was as though Uly had come to him when he was most needed, just as Ryanac had done.

He knew now that Ryanac had good reason for the choices he made. At the time, in his naiveté, Markis had been amazed his new captain so quickly learned the layout of the palace and should arrive at what most would see as an inopportune time. The truth was, Ryanac had arrived earlier that day, spent three hours exploring the palace, and then chosen to interrupt a lesson. He had wanted to know what they put Markis through and, forever after, Ryanac chose moments to protect him. Markis hadn't realised that in all these years but, looking back on it now, the prince could see that Ryanac broke up sessions when a lesson went on too long or he thought they were getting too heavy-handed with the use of pain. It was Ryanac, always Ryanac, always with him, always turning up at just the right moment. However, to see what he had looked like that day, through Ryanac's eyes...

Markis closed his eyes and turned his head so he could more fully breathe in the scent of Uly's hair. Then he dipped his head and breathed in the warm, clean skin smell of his neck. He didn't feel like Shavar. He didn't feel like a prince right now. He certainly hadn't looked like a prince that day.

He had started these sessions with Ryanac as a way to test and train with the comet, to give the big man something he seemed to need, and also to satisfy his own curiosity. Now, tonight, he thought of the memories and emotions they had shared in the abyss with uncertainty. People searched a lifetime for someone with whom they could feel complete. To merge with another was something most would give almost anything to experience. Alas, he had discovered to do so could be a threat to one's sanity. It could also grow addictive. You could lose yourself in the experience, but that was not what he feared. He feared them merging so completely they might not find their way out. The pull of seeing himself at his most vulnerable and miserable of moments, and then feeling wrapped up in Ryanac's strength, his calm regard, his certainty and love, was disabling. His barriers shattered and his guard now knew what it meant to be Shavar. The person who knew him better than anyone, even before they shared the abyss, was out there in the night. The one person he truly wanted to merge with lay in his arms. Markis felt lost and lonely in a way he hadn't felt since he was a boy and learned of his duty.

"Markis, you're squeezing me."

The prince blinked, opening his eyes, easing up on the body in his arms. Inadvertently, he had hugged Uly so tight as to hurt him enough to wake him. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. Uly stared up into his eyes for a long time.

"Don't be," the younger man said, and the strange sensation that Uly referred to more than his squeezing came over him. Markis was less surprised when Uly lifted his head and sought a kiss, their lips pressing lightly, caressing, before that mouth locking onto his became more demanding. Although always eager for a kiss, for the first time, Uly kissed him in a way that was adult but had nothing to do with age. By the time Uly gasped out, "Make love to me," Markis was already reaching for the oil.

When Uly moved to turn, Markis caught his hip. "No," he said, for they had never made love face-to-face, at least not the way Markis wanted.

"Like this?" Uly sounded a little uncertain.

"You know it's possible," Markis said, referring to when Uly had entered him the other day, and even in the dim light he could see the coy expression on Uly's face. It signified embarrassment but also delight. "I want to see you."

"It's too dark."

He couldn't tell if Uly was pleased or disappointed by that. "I'll provide the light," Markis told him, and called the comet.

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When Markis first called the ball of light, he witnessed Uly's consternation. Now, several minutes later, as they rocked together, the light seemed secondary. Hot, slick tightness enveloped him and tugged not only his cock but his heart along with it. Uly, on his back, gazed up at him, his sight seeming a little unfocused at times, but never wavering. Markis couldn't interpret the look, but it appeared to contain absolute trust and faith. Markis couldn't help it. He expanded the light to envelop them, and pulled them into the abyss.

Uly gasped, swallowed, fighting a wave of nausea that Markis could not only feel but he quickly drove back. He silently apologised, but Uly's mind told him he had no need to. Still Uly didn't retreat. They rocked, and Uly's body bowed around him, fingers curling into tight little knots in his flesh. Markis tried to stay out of Uly's thoughts while at the same time suppressing the guilt that this was what Ryanac wanted and he did it with Uly instead. Yet for now, Markis held much of himself back. Physically, they shared the experience. Fucked and fucking, overlapped, joined, twisting, Markis both lay on his back receiving and was at the same time kneeling and giving all that he had. The sensation blended, left both men moaning. For one moment, Markis feared he might lose control of this. The sensation was simply too blissful; it was surely a sin for them to get away without paying a price for it.

"Don't be afraid," he said aloud, and Uly's gaze swept back and forth.

"I'm not." Even as Uly said it, and then, even before Markis felt his intention, Uly's gaze went blank and he stared at the abyss. To try to explain that to anyone who hadn't experienced its presence would be next to impossible, but the abyss existed somehow, somewhere, and Uly stared at it. Afraid Uly wouldn't come back to him, Markis gave the only thing he could -- physical pleasure. Uly rode the abyss along with their joint orgasm and in that moment, his gaze focused and they cried out, all the while staring into each other's eyes.

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"Why did you stay with me when I hurt you?" Markis asked sometime later, referring to past events. They lay quiet, neither of them sleeping. Uly combed his fingers through Markis's hair and Markis lay with his head on the soft flesh of the young man's stomach. Since their shared orgasm, Markis had avoided his gaze, afraid of what he might see. Now he turned his head and looked up the length of Uly's body to his face. Although the light remained dim, morning approached and Markis could see more than he expected, more than he liked. "After the things you've experienced, why tolerate what I did to you?"

Uly rubbed a hand across his face. The gesture was altogether masculine and mature. "Compared to other things that I've experienced, it was nothing."

"Don't lie. I tried to kill you twice. After what we just shared, tell me the truth. Why did you stay with me?"

Those cool grey eyes finally turned towards his face. "I don't know what love is. Not really. I know what I want it to be and I know how I feel for you, but I've nothing to base it on. No comparison. I stayed at the time because I had such a low opinion of myself that I didn't think my life mattered to anyone."

"Including yourself?"

Uly just shrugged. "It felt like a miracle someone like you would even deem to spend time with me. When you said I had a choice, it took me a long time to believe you."

"Yet why forgive me something I can never forgive myself for?"

That cool gaze stared at him. "You should. The first time Ryanac pulled you back from what you did. The second time, you stopped yourself. It was progress. I didn't know it then. I just had nowhere else to go and I clung to every little slice of affection offered me. It was more than I'd ever received from people who were supposed to love me. When I finally understood what you went through, how could I not forgive you?"

Aware he frowned, Markis couldn't look away or soften the expression on his face. Staring into Uly's eyes started to feel more uncomfortable than sharing the abyss with someone, but he couldn't look away.

"It's not you," Uly told him. "The part of the abyss that you fear. It's not you."

"All men have a dark side."

"True, but this evil isn't you. I don't even think it's the comet. It..." Uly hesitated, frowning as well now. "It's almost as if it's someone else's darkness. It doesn't feel as though it belongs in the abyss at all."

Markis laughed. "How can you know so much about the abyss after spending so short a time with it?" He tried to lighten the conversation, but could see Uly wouldn't allow it.

"I *felt* it," Uly insisted, and something in his tone left no room for argument.

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"You can learn fighting with your fists from Ryanac. This technique is a little more subtle." Antal shared a grin with some of the other men and then moved to meet his opponent. Uly tried to focus his attention. After all, this was for his benefit. He watched Antal greet the rush, not with a closed fist but with an open palm. He frowned, a little uncertain what he had actually seen. Antal followed the movement through in a circular fashion and got into a position where he could throw his opponent.

The man on the floor looked up, grinning. His chest rose and fell heavily and he reached out a hand to Antal, who pulled him to his feet. "Of course," the loser said, leaning into his friend, "if we were doing this for real, there's no way this one would have beat me."

Antal rolled his eyes; clearly, he had heard it all before. "You know what they say about those who have to boast." He sauntered over to Uly. "It's not as difficult as it looks. It's actually a form of non-violent defence. You use your attacker's own force against them. You can throw them, even immobilise them. Of course, you can follow this through with a killing blow. I'd not advise anyone to get close to a real opponent if you can avoid it, but if you have no choice, it's good to know. It takes less energy than your attacker will use and it's handy if you need to keep someone alive, say for information. Nevertheless, if someone's trying to take your head off, do what you have to do to stay alive."

Uly nodded. He had lived on the streets; he agreed with the sentiment. However, he never went looking for a fight, and never intended to. "I'm still not sure I get the concept behind the idea."

Antal returned the nod as though he expected this. "Here." He grabbed hold of Uly's hands, taking him by surprise. Uly tensed before he could help it and glanced around, but the others had broken off to do other things. He looked back to Antal's eyes. The other man flattened their palms together and then curled his fingers over the sides of Uly's hands. The feel of someone else's skin pressed close to his brought heat to his face and other places. A light teasing smile played around Antal's lips and eyes. He moved his fingers slightly in a light caress before he said, "Try to push me away."

The very fact that Uly didn't want to made him try. He hesitated only for an instant and then tightened his muscles, dug his feet in, dipped his head. Antal did the same thing and they struggled and pushed against each other for a minute. The tussle became almost a

battle of wills as they stared into one another's eyes. Suddenly, Antal relaxed and turned his body to the side. The sudden removal of an equal force took Uly by surprise. A small sound escaped him as he practically flew by. Antal reached out to save him from the fall but, irritated beyond reason, Uly grabbed at the other man's clothes. They tumbled, Uly coming to rest flat on his back with Antal on top of him. The other man was giggling. The sound vibrated between them. Uly lay there for a moment with Antal staring down and smiling into his face. Their faces were so close they shared breath.

"Off. Get off!" Uly pushed and slapped him away, struggled to his feet, and flounced off without even brushing himself down. Despite what Markis had said last night, he feared the idea of friendship with Antal. He feared this friendship might lead to something else. Maybe if he had been born Swithin, he wouldn't get the signals confused so much...or had he? Antal said he could get hard for him in an instant. The Swithin just seemed to understand when to back off, and they did it without complaint. The kiss happened. If they could have forgotten it, if Antal could have behaved as if it didn't exist this morning, he wouldn't be having such a difficult time. What Uly couldn't cope with was the casual closeness, the teasing gestures and looks. Everyone might tell him it didn't mean what he thought it did, but it didn't change the way he felt. He liked Antal, but he loved Markis. That didn't mean he could just be oblivious to him.

"Hey, wait!" Antal ran to keep up and grabbed him by the shoulder. A sharp tug brought Uly to a halt, but at the same time, Antal let go and backed up a step. He needn't have worried. Uly had no intention of fighting with him for real. Besides, without more training, he would probably lose. Still, the young guard waited until he seemed sure of what Uly would do. His smile was cautious. "I thought we'd been over this. You can relax. I know you belong to Shavar." The open reference to what just happened brought heat to Uly's face along with a sense of dismay.

"So people keep telling me," Uly retaliated. "I don't find it as easy as you all seem to do." The look on Antal's face made him add, "I'm sorry."

"I owe you the apology. I sometimes forget you're not Swithin. I like you, Uly, and I know only one way to be around you, and that's relaxed. That doesn't mean I want anything from you. A polite refusal isn't an insult. Neither is showing an interest. The way you just reacted, however, is."

Something dark and horrible crept over his skin. He hadn't intended to insult anyone. "I didn't mean..."

Antal laughed and made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "I told you. You're not Swithin and I've a thicker skin--"

A *thunk* of sound turned both their heads. Something thudded into the ground. It took Uly a moment to accept that it was arrow. His mouth and eyes opened wide just as Antal ploughed into him and took them down to the ground. The next two arrows *thudded* into Antal's body in quick succession, the third as Uly's gaze met Antal's eyes. The look in them

conveyed shock and, more surprisingly, resignation. Antal's weight on him grew; pain tightened the skin around the young guard's eyes. No more arrows struck home and, as Uly glanced to the side, he saw that other guards surrounded them, many of them holding shields, protecting them now. The line of the ridge loomed high above. Markis had said the rocks were barren and almost impossible to climb. Impossible apparently wasn't good enough. It had to be from on high that their attacker struck, though he had no idea who or why, and it didn't even seem important right now. Antal had protected Uly's body with his own. Staring back into his eyes, Uly wanted to ask him why. He couldn't say a word.

His friend spoke for him. Although pain laced the voice, so did love and warmth. "Live well, Uly," Antal said, growing heavier still. "Thank you...for the kiss." Then Antal smiled and closed his eyes.

## Chapter Seventeen

“Out. Out. GET OUT!” Markis raged through the tent and the comet roared in his wake. Those trying to help took one look at his face, glanced at the injured man, and hurried out. They had said the wounds were too severe. Ryanac held the flap of the tent up out of their way and then let it fall.

“Can you do this?” the guard asked.

Uly looked up. Do what? Surely, Antal was dead. He looked at the body and feared the flash of hope that ignited. Blood covered his hands. He could feel it drying on his skin like a scab, yet none of it was his. There were six of them in the tent -- him, Markis, Ryanac, Tressa and her maid, as well as Antal, of course. An instant after Antal had closed his eyes and Uly had begun to scream his name, others lifted his body away. Despite his protests, they forced him to keep low. He hadn’t known much of anything, numb from the idea that Antal was dead, until they made it back to the tent. Tressa had kept one of the larger tents, the one that the four of them should have shared, to herself for the last few days. Now he was grateful, for it meant that it was one of the last awaiting dismantle. It made it a perfect place to bring Antal, if he still lived.

“Keep him alive,” Markis snapped. Tressa looked across at her husband, her eyes wide, and a complaint clearly on her lips. Then, as she caught sight of the young man’s face, her expression changed. Perhaps she recognised the young guard she had unwittingly insulted the other week. As she pressed a hand to her throat and swallowed, Uly believed so if he could judge by the look on her face. Markis had told Uly all about that incident, even though Antal had found her ignorance rather entertaining. She snapped her mouth shut, looked at her maid, and nodded. Together, they started to do what they could, which seemed to include getting a knife and cutting Antal free of his clothes. Uly hated seeing him lying there like that, pale and bleeding, with three arrows protruding from his back. To remove them in

haste could cause more damage. Antal's face lay to the side and looked peaceful, yet somehow empty. He couldn't be alive.

"What can I do?" he whispered to Tressa.

"Here." She handed him the knife. "Get his clothes off him so we can see better. Idelle, get water. I will get cloths." She glanced up to Uly's face. "He breathes. It is shallow, but right now he still lives."

"What can we do that the guards and healer can't?" He couldn't understand why Markis had thrown everyone out of the tent.

Tressa looked at him again and then across the tent to Markis. Uly followed her gaze for just an instant. Markis shoved everything out of his way and took out the pilfered book. "I do not think it is a matter of what we can do but what *he* can do," she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Can you do this?" Ryanac asked.

"Keep him alive," Markis snapped at Tressa, and turned to the book. He wanted to comfort Uly, but the best he could do for the young man was to make sure he didn't lose his new friend. He flung the book down, tearing one of the pages in his haste. Ignoring the damage, he flipped through. He hadn't gone through all the pages in the book in detail, but he had discussed its contents with Ryanac. The man had good reason to ask, but Markis didn't have the answer. "I can try," he said. No one could argue with that. He was vaguely aware of the four people at his back, working on Antal, doing what they knew to slow down the bleeding, keep him breathing. Even so, they finished what they could all too soon. Silence weighed heavy in the tent and still he read.

Eventually, he straightened up. He hadn't wanted to try this until he gained better control. Although he had wanted to share minds with Ryanac, that wasn't his sole purpose for trying the experiment. The guard knew that, but felt no animosity because of it. Ryanac even agreed. Sound reasoning had directed his decisions up until this point and that was what he had to remember now. Markis needed to remain calm.

Dragging his tunic off over his head, Markis stood there bare-chested. A slight feminine sound came from his back, and from the corner of his eye, he saw Ryanac raise a hand. Tressa ushered her protesting maid from the tent. He ignored the slight distraction as best he could. He ignored the others, even Uly. He couldn't even afford to spare him a glance. He approached the improvised table of boards atop crates where Antal lay prone. At least no one had pulled out the arrows or turned him on his back or side. Markis stared at the young man's face and then at his back. He became aware of the tension in Tressa, the spark of hope rapidly fading in Uly, and Ryanac's comfort and support hiding a quiet anxiety. He drew away from all of them, closing his eyes.



The abyss opened readily but the comet moved out of reach. He had the sense of a child not wanting to play a certain game. The comet liked extremes. Fine. It could have anger. *You bloody well do what I tell you or I'll never call on you again.* That was something else he learned from the pages. He might have access to the power, but he didn't have to use it. No one had ever told him these things. Without Uly, he might never have obtained the book, he might never have learned any of it. No way would he let Uly down now. Markis reached for the power again, took hold of it, grasped it, and pulled it down to the body under his hands.

He dived in, searched for the injuries, found only an erratic heartbeat slowing with each thready thump. He ignored it, hating the necessity. Markis searched for damaged organs and found them. Opening his eyes, he circled his hands over the worst of the three injuries. Two were serious but treatable. Only one was killing him. One was enough. He gave a short nod, and Ryanac went to work with a knife, easing the arrow free. Tressa reached in to mop up the seeping blood. She handed each blood-drenched cloth to Uly, and he gave her a clean one to take its place.

"Quickly," Markis hissed. They had to finish this before Antal lost too much blood.

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"I did not know the comet could do that." Tressa said.

"Neither did I." Markis was tired, but then so were they all. "Don't look so surprised," he told her. "Apparently, there are a few things the council decided to keep from me." He watched her gaze travel over to the book.

"You took a risk," Ryanac said. "When they hear about this, Stargazer will know you have the book."

"He probably suspects anyway and he still has to prove it." He really felt too tired for this, but then maybe the conversation would keep him awake. The guards wanted them to move from the area but he wasn't going to do that until he was sure Antal wouldn't suffer for it. He hadn't gone to all this effort to lose him now. They were ready to march and would do so before night, but he hoped Antal would open his eyes before then.

Tressa's gaze turned towards Uly. "You stole a book?"

Markis regarded her calmly. His gaze took in the blood staining her hands. She had washed them, but truly, they all needed to scrub the blood out of the creases. A simple wash never did that. She gave him a wry grin and shrugged when she saw him looking. "It is only blood," she said.

"Could you heal others?" Ryanac asked. "Could you heal the king?"

Drawing in a deep breath, Markis let it out before he said, "I don't know. According to the book, the power of healing is limited. It cannot prevent aging or the natural course of

things. It seems to consider disease a natural process, but something like a knife wound abnormal.”

“Which is why you could heal the arrow wounds.” Tressa apparently had no problems with the concept.

“Yes, but even then what I did was less than I hoped. I only healed the wounds enough so we could treat them. Time and nature will have to do the rest.”

“You staved off death.” Uly’s voice called to him. He looked at his Samir. Those calm grey eyes looked back. “You healed him enough so he wouldn’t die. That’s enough for me.”

They stared until the atmosphere in the tent became almost awkward. Ryanac interrupted. “How could the council keep this secret? To have this power to heal--”

“Is incredible, yes, but I cannot use it openly even if I had known. The council was right in some ways to keep it secret.” Markis noticed Uly frowning.

“He cannot let anyone know of this,” Tressa said. “People would come from all around, and he has not the strength to heal everyone.” She turned her gaze back to him. “No offence, Shavar, but look at what one simple healing has done to you.”

Markis let out a self-deprecating laugh. Ryanac had already told him dark rings encircled his eyes. He hadn’t needed telling. He could feel the strain of what he had done. “You’re right. If someone attacked now I’m not sure I could wield a sword, let alone call the comet. Thankfully, there’s no one out there who knows that, which is probably why they’ve left us alone. They failed in what they intended to do and have probably run.”

“Failed?” Tressa looked to their fallen companion. “I do not see what they meant to accomplish. What was the point in hurting just one of us? Why this one?”

Markis looked not at Tressa, but at Uly. He saw the knowledge of what he was about to say dawn in those eyes. He would have spared Uly the pain of it if he could. “They weren’t aiming for Antal. They were aiming for Uly. They meant to hurt him to get at me. Antal saved his life.” He shook his head, refusing to release Uly’s gaze. “Don’t blame yourself for this. It was Antal’s duty, and I am certain his choice. Do not fear for your life. I’m not letting you leave my side.”

“We were careless,” Ryanac added. “We’re on Swithin land and we felt safe. It won’t happen again. Our arrogance said no one would think to ambush us here.”

Uly turned his gaze away and stared at the ground. “The other day I thought I saw someone. On top of the ridge. Then a large bird flew off and I thought it was that I had seen.”

“Maybe that’s all it was, and if not, it’s not your fault,” Ryanac insisted. “If you told someone, they probably would have agreed it was the bird or taken it for imagination.”

“You wouldn’t have,” Uly retorted.

Ryanac opened his mouth perhaps to argue, then closed it again on a small smile.

Tressa frowned. "Do you think an Azulite did this?" She might no longer be their princess in anything but name, but the tone of her voice said woe betide any Azulite she caught with a guilty hand in this.

"It could be, but I doubt it." Markis looked at Ryanac. They understood one another.

"One of our own," Ryanac said.

It made perfect sense. The guarded passage meant someone could only climb the ridge from this side. Already they had spread out trying to block the escape route of anyone that descended, but the chance of catching those responsible was remote. He looked back to Uly. "I will discover who did this. It may test my patience before then, and we shall have to keep our investigation quiet, but I will find who did this and make them pay, and the coin I ask for is red and bright." He could see the many questions Uly wanted to ask. "We'll talk another day, Uly. Not tonight."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ryanac squeezed his shoulder. "You should get some sleep."

"I know, but I can't. My mind is racing."

Markis saw the guard look across to where Tressa and Uly had finally given in to exhaustion. "You almost lost him."

He didn't have an answer for that. They both knew the truth of it, and the pain of it threatened to engulf him if he gave it focus. Markis looked to Antal's face instead. "I owe him. Besides, I couldn't let Uly lose another friend." They both knew he referred to Uly's past.

"I thought you might discourage the friendship. I'm sorry if it's pained you. I didn't know they would like each other this much." Ryanac talked low and quiet. It made the large space feel small and intimate.

"I wouldn't do that, and yes, it bothered me, but not now. I'm glad he's made a friend. I want him to have such a friend in his life." He looked up into Ryanac's eyes. He stared until Ryanac's mouth broke into a grin. The big man glanced at Antal, then back again.

"Will you tell him when he wakes, or shall I?"

"I'll...ask him." As Shavar, he could make what they were discussing an order, but he had no taste for that.

"I'll take a look outside and make sure we're ready to move."

They had agreed they would move in two hours whether Antal woke or not. Markis nodded and when the guard left, he leaned forward. Half an hour later he was still staring when Antal's eyelids fluttered open. Markis watched awareness slowly come into the eyes, then pain tightened the young man's face. They had done what they could for the pain.

He followed Antal's gaze down to his hands. He'd held onto the young guard's hand for so long today he'd forgotten it. Rather than let go, Markis stroked a thumb over the back of the hand.

"I'm alive?"

Markis would have laughed at the disbelief in the voice if not so tired. "Yes. Hold still and you'll be fine. We're moving out soon enough."

Antal frowned. "Uly?"

"He's right over there, sleeping. I'll wake him in a minute. He'll be pleased to see you awake."

Antal's expression looked suspicious. "I was sure I was dying."

"You were."

The eyes moved up as much as the awkward position would allow. "I owe you my life?"

"You can feel it?" Markis already knew the answer. Antal nodded awkwardly. "I've left a little power within you. As you heal, it will dissipate. No one can know." Markis watched those amber eyes search his face until understanding flowed into them. Antal swallowed, then gave another awkward nod.

"I promise."

Continuing to stroke the hand, Markis said, "I have something to ask of you." He wanted Antal to meet his gaze again but the young man seemed lost, or perhaps shocked by the idea that Shavar held his hand. Markis leaned forward so that his face was level with the hand. Antal's gaze couldn't escape him that way. "Uly needs a protector," he said. "I have Ryanac, and I know you know he's more than that to me. Everyone does, though no one speaks of it." Antal didn't need him to explain and it wasn't the guard's place to ask why. That Shavar told him this meant something else, though. "Still, no one can protect all of us all of the time. I can't protect everyone all of the time. When you're back on your feet, I would like you to be Uly's protector. You can continue to train him and watch his back at the same time."

"As you wish," Antal said. Markis shook his head.

"No. I'm asking. You've risked your life once already for Uly. I will not demand that you do it again. If you refuse, there is no shame in it. Don't do this because you have your life back or because Shavar asks. Only say yes if you would do it for Uly."

Once more, Antal searched his eyes as if looking for the truth. "I'd be honoured," Antal said. Somehow, Markis hadn't expected anything less. As he sat up, Antal's gaze flicked towards the area where Uly slept. "He might argue about it, though."

"Don't worry about that," Markis answered with a soft laugh. "I'll take care of his arguments. Now, let's wake him up. You can speak, and then we'll get you settled in a carriage ready to move. Once you're settled, I'll give you something to make you sleep while we travel."

As he stood up, Antal kept hold of his hand. "Shavar," he said. "No offence, but do you know how awful you look?"

Markis laughed again, but the young man had a point. Maybe he should sleep by Antal's side in the carriage for the next few hours at least.

## Chapter Eighteen

“Well, what do you think?” Ryanac clearly struggled not to smile as he asked Uly the question. If he did, he failed miserably. Markis grinned along with him. Perhaps, if they hadn’t glanced at each other, they could have maintained a straight face. They both noticed Uly’s expression, however, and it was their undoing. Uly gaped and, though it might seem cruel, the look on his face amused both men.

The Swithin City lay spread out before them. The pale sand gave way at a high stone wall to a far-reaching metropolis, the buildings built of stone from a now largely disused and ancient quarry. Gradually, over many generations, the style succumbed to other influences; tiles, both ceramic and terracotta, abounded. In some ways, the city appeared to be a mismatch, but somehow, it also managed to look perfect. Despite these outside influences, the unique look was entirely Swithin. At the heart, even from this distance, they could see the turrets of the Swithin palace. It made the castle they shared back in Uly’s district look like a small model of what a palace should be.

“That’s where you come from, where you live?” Uly blinked finally and turned his head to look at Markis.

“That’s where *we’ll* live,” Markis stressed. When a look of uncertainty and maybe a little fear crept into Uly’s face, Markis nudged his mount a tad closer. He reached out to trace a gentle finger down Uly’s cheek. If any of the guards around them noticed, they pretended not to. Not that Shavar had no right to touch his Samir. The gesture, though, was undeniably intimate.

“What do you think?” Markis asked suddenly, directing the question not at Uly but elsewhere, and all three of them turned on their horses to look back to the carriage that carried Tressa, her maid, and right at this minute, an injured Antal. Tressa had insisted on

staying with him to nurse him until they made it to the city. She had raised the canvas to look out.

"I love it," she told him, a look of pure delight on her face. A frown quickly chased it back. "Where are the trees and shrubs you promised me?"

Markis laughed gently. "There are plenty, but most do not rise above the wall. Beyond the palace, the land opens up into a deep green valley. The outlying towns are mostly farmland."

"Where I come from," Ryanac added, turning a challenging eye on the princess. She blinked at him, opened her mouth and then closed it, apparently having thought better of making a remark.

"Where I used to play," Markis contributed, making it Ryanac's turn to blink. Turning his head, the guard looked at the prince and nodded. He turned to the front again as the rider they were expecting rode out to greet them. They were five miles yet from the city, but their approach would not have gone unnoticed. The small group of ten riders drew up. The man in the lead bowed his head to the prince.

"Shavar," he said respectfully. When Markis returned the gesture, the man then looked to Ryanac. "Captain," he said with a curt nod. "Ryanac Silas Semari, I believe."

"You believe correctly."

"I'm Bryden Sedryche. I have heard Errick Samari speak well of you."

He did his best, but Markis couldn't help the smirk. From the corner of his eye, he could see Ryanac spotted it.

"Sardian awaits you, Shavar," Bryden said, turning his head back to the prince. A slight look of puzzlement touched the man's face; he probably wondered why Shavar smiled so, but the remark quickly chased Markis's smile away. Once more, he nodded.

"I take it he wants to see me directly, Sedryche."

"He wants to see all of you, Shavar."

Although the report was not entirely unexpected, still it was unwelcome. Markis had hoped to see his father alone first.

"How fares my father?"

Markis's wording was deliberate. Bryden Sedryche hesitated, then said, "Not well, Shavar. We are pained for his plight and glad you have returned to us."

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"I thought you were captain of the guard."

Ryanac laughed. "I am captain, that is, Samari, of Markis's regiment. The king has his regiment and there are others for various duties. Six main regiments sometimes break up into small divisions if needed in other parts of the world. I am a captain of Shavar's guard."

"Doesn't Markis have brothers?"

"Yes. Two of them."

"Then, are they Shavar as well?" Uly frowned as he struggled with the concept.

"Yes and no. Either the next in line to the throne or the strongest is Shavar. In Markis's case, he happens to be both. The king is also Shavar, but when he steps down or his power fails, he will hand his title over to the new king. Markis will become Shavar Sardian."

"And if one of his brothers gains a greater power?"

Ryanac snorted. "Mairtin has never been strong enough. Kilan is too young and only recently tested. They do not feel he will ever be as strong as Markis and, even if one day he were, by that time, Markis would have ruled as king for many years. Markis would have to die in battle, or one of his brothers would have to be exceptionally strong to overshadow him. A good ruler would then step down just as his father is doing to let the stronger man take his place."

"I thought the king was dying."

Ryanac looked at Uly only by moving his eyes. He kept his face to the front. "He is, but he would step down anyway. His power began to fail due to illness some years ago, and he has only remained in place because none of his sons was ready, and therefore none suitable. Markis was stronger, but his lack of control posed a greater threat. Sometimes..."

"What?"

Ryanac gave a slight movement that might have been a betrayal of some deep feeling. The man glanced at the prince, who had settled back a few paces so he could talk to Tressa as they approached the city. When Markis wasn't doing that, he spoke with Bryden, and some of that conversation they could hear. Most of it was court politics. Uly stared at Ryanac until the man noticed.

"You deserve an answer," the big man said. "I believe that the old teachings are outdated and foolish for the most part. I make no bones about that." He paused until Uly nodded in understanding. "I also believe the reason they worked so extraordinarily ill with Markis is because he's the strongest Shavar we have known. When Shavar comes of age, he joins an academy for at least four years. A lot of young men do and, in some cases, some women, all those that may need fighting and strategic skills. Some stay longer than others depending on how well they do or what their ultimate goal is, but Shavar has to move on to learn control of the comet usually sooner. Our choices of academy separated us, but his lessons kept us apart until he could no longer deny his need of a friend."

Ryanac turned his head this time to look at Uly, and also glanced over his shoulder as he did. He lowered his voice. "I sometimes regret that I left him at all. I could have gone to the same academy. I could have convinced Markis to send for me as soon as my minimum term was up if I had, but I also see the sense of your words. When you said you are glad we were apart, you made me face something I did not want to. We would not be the men we



are, would not have the relationship we now have, if it were not for the years of separation. In some ways, I believe we would not be so close, even if the opposite seems logical.”

“I have wondered,” Uly interrupted, “if I was wrong to say that. I have wondered if your presence might not have made Markis stronger.”

“Perhaps.” Ryanac pursed his lips and looked to the front. “Yet I think stronger in Markis’s case might have meant harder.” He glanced once more at Uly. “You have yet to meet his father.”

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The sound of their boots echoed along the stone passage. With wry amusement, Markis noted Uly’s eyes roving left and right as they walked, even though the prince told him to stop gaping. Tressa fared a little better. After her initial shock, once as they rode into the city and people began to cry out “Shavar” in greeting, and again as they rode through the palace gates, she schooled her face appropriately, as a good queen should. He could hardly blame them. It took all he had not to turn his head and gape with them. He’d been away from home a long time.

He glanced at Ryanac and almost jumped as his friend’s gaze turned toward him instantly. The quiet acknowledgement of the man’s feelings shone in those dark eyes. Markis didn’t want to walk, dignified, down these halls. He wanted to run and whoop as he had done as a boy until someone shouted at him. They told even a king’s son off for making too much noise, but out in the woods there had been no such thing. He and Ryanac had run, climbed trees, wrestled, played, and got as mucky as small boys generally could, and they did it as often as they could get away with it. He was thirty-one years old and he wanted to take Ryanac’s hand and run as they had done when they were boys. From the look in his friend’s eyes, his guard felt the same way.

“So, Mairtin is here,” Ryanac remarked. He had clearly overheard most of the conversation with Bryden.

“He was closest when the king took a turn for the worse. Kilan is on his way home.”

Ryanac’s jaw tightened a little. No doubt he wanted to ask what Markis felt about his father’s impending death. Instead, the guard dropped his gaze and then looked back up, his way of giving Markis a nod of agreement or understanding when the real thing was inappropriate. In truth, Markis had mixed feelings. He loved his father but found it easiest to do that from a distance. He disobeyed him in allowing the Azulites to live and in marrying their princess. This was not going to be a good meeting. Fortunately, he’d had time to warn all of them of that. As for his brothers, he spoke blankly when mentioning Mairtin and a hint of warmth crept into his voice when he said Kilan’s name. He would have to watch that, as Ryanac was by no means the only one who would notice.

“You’ve not seen either for many years and Kilan was a mere boy.”

"I know." Markis kept his voice guarded, but it was pointless to try to fool this man. Kilan had an untainted quality that he hoped training would not contaminate. Mairtin had always been solitary and quick to judge.

"Strange your middle brother can drop things so quickly when he is in training and the youngest, Kilan, is only at an academy. I could not see you stepping back from your training at such a time so easily." His middle brother was more than four years his junior. Markis turned his mind to how he was back then at Mairtin's age. His friend only spoke the truth, but Ryanac was baiting him.

"He's never had a problem with the power," Markis said, "or been bothered by celibacy."

The last bit he intended as an added insult, but Ryanac supplemented it. "Why does that not surprise me?"

They both felt the same way about Mairtin. They shared a knowing smile and just in that moment, Stargazer stepped in front of him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Markis had seen the old man bristle with anger before, but Stargazer usually aimed that anger at an unruly pupil. He was Shavar, the Comet. The look on the old man's face brought a smirk to his lips before he could avoid it. Markis accepted it for a mistake the moment he did it.

The old man was one of the seers and, in times past, had commanded a great deal of respect and power. Markis still recognised the old man's influence but, he could not respect him. Stargazer's real name was so complicated on the tongue as to make it unpronounceable. Markis couldn't even remember it. He had been Stargazer when Markis was a boy, and remained so to this day. What changed was the fact that the old man could no longer intimidate him. Stargazer had stepped into his path once before to complain about Uly. Then, Markis had warned him he might not stop walking and so, although he had stopped in surprise, he began to walk towards the old man. It took only three paces, and in the next step, they would touch. Markis made the movement slow but determined. He stared into the old man's eyes, and they widened in realisation. To touch Shavar without his permission could mean death for the offender. No one had enforced the law for generations, but it remained an option. Markis had no real desire to order the old man's death, but if he didn't step out of the way, he would find it sorely tempting.

Stargazer almost stumbled in his haste to step aside. He recovered in time, though clearly didn't take kindly to even Shavar making him appear ungainly. He hurried along at Markis's side, lowering his voice. "I know you took the book," he hissed, either purposely dropping or forgetting all pretences of addressing the prince correctly.

Markis slid his gaze towards Stargazer's face. "How would I have done something like that?" The question was foolish as Stargazer's gaze immediately settled on Uly, but Markis couldn't help it. Stargazer gritted his teeth so hard that Markis expected to hear them grind. He almost felt sorry for the old man.

"There are reasons you should not have such things."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

Stargazer tripped, regained his momentum, and scurried along at the prince's side. "You lie to my face?"

Markis's patience ran out. He stopped walking so that Stargazer overtook him and needed to stop and turn back. "My dear seer, if you have been careless with a book, that is your problem. I would suggest you do not broadcast your oversight so strongly unless you wish to bring it to the attention of the king." By the grit of Stargazer's jaw, Markis could see that the old man very much wanted to. The trouble with that plan was he would then have to confess to losing the book in the first place. If Sardian believed Markis had taken it, he would still be more pissed at the seer.

"I want that book back." Stargazer hissed once more, but his voice held a hint of frustration.

"And I want a peaceful world for me and my children to live in. Pity we can't have everything we ask for." Markis stepped around the seer, his companions following. As a quartet, the four of them approached the king's suite.

## Chapter Nineteen

"Harton." Markis nodded to the man standing in the outer room of the suite. Harton was to the king what Ryanac was to him, but only as captain. As far as he knew, Harton and his father had never been lovers, and no one had ever been Samir to his father, not even Markis's mother.

Harton stood tall. What he lacked in muscle when compared to Ryanac, he made up for in height. Years had added a few lines to his face, but most of them he no doubt acquired in association with the king. Harton was one of the few men who wore his hair a little differently, having it swept back tight to the face around the ears and then straight down, the braid finally beginning at the nape of his neck. He also cut it somewhat shorter than most Swithin men did. It suited him and gave his face wisdom.

"Markis," Harton said softly in reply to his greeting. Beside him, Ryanac tensed. Clearly, he didn't like what he saw as an implied insult. Harton noticed. His gaze slid towards Ryanac and then back to Markis's face. He made no move to uncross his folded arms, hands tucked into his armpits. He rested back against the edge of a table, his feet crossed at the ankles. Just as well, or else Ryanac might have held a blade to his throat, king's guard or no.

"It's good to see you, old friend," Markis said before things got out of hand. Still, it took a second for Ryanac to relax. He still didn't like the familiarity. For once, Markis didn't care what Ryanac liked. Unless things had changed, Harton was a friend.

"Not so much of the old," Harton said. A crash sounded from the other room. Through the open door, they could glimpse the corner of the king's bed. Harton's gaze turned to the door and then the tall man closed his eyes before lowering his chin and then opening them again to gaze at the floor.

"How is he?"

"Cantankerous," was the quiet reply, then Harton came to attention as the king came into the room. He made the movement fluid even with a few extra years on his frame. "You should be in bed," Harton said, clearly addressing the king and ignoring the visitors. Leraï, Markis's father, turned his dark, glittering eyes to the room and then looked at Harton.

"I'll lie down when I'm dead," the king snapped. He turned his head to Markis. "Which no doubt my son is pleased to hear will be soon enough."

"Sardian." Markis gave a slight bow. "Forgive me for asking, but why would such a thing please me?"

"Well, for one thing, if it had happened already we wouldn't need to have this conversation." His gaze swept the room and then returned to Markis's face. "A whore and a thief. My, you have done well out in the world. I guess it's a good thing your mother's not alive to see this."

\* \* \* \* \*

"What say you?" Leraï stood in front of Tressa. Like all the men, he towered over her. Ryanac made not one twitch, but Markis could tell that like him, his guard wanted to go to her. Not even as Shavar could he do that. His father would do nothing to harm her. To do so would have been an indiscretion even Leraï would not tolerate, but if Markis helped her in this, his father could make things difficult.

"I am no whore, Sardian. I am a princess and soon to be your son's queen."

Leraï laughed. "You are mistaken," he said. Even a princess could only school her face so much. Her puzzlement shone through. Markis closed his eyes for a split second and then opened them again before his father looked at him. "You haven't told her," Leraï said, a smirk on his face.

Markis wanted to deny it, but he couldn't. He had wanted to get Tressa safely into the city before springing it on her, and he had wanted time to talk to her before they faced this. Now, his father had scuppered his plan. He met Leraï's gaze and calculated that his father would take great pleasure in telling Tressa precisely why he called her a whore, although the Swithin had no such things. Calmly, Markis pivoted on his heel and faced his bride.

"I promised you a Swithin wedding as becomes you, but until we are wed here, my people will regard you as she who will be married."

To her credit, Tressa kept her face and voice calm. "You mean the ceremony we shared meant nothing?"

"Not nothing. It meant something in the eyes of your people."

"Yet not yours?"

"It means something to us too, but the king can refuse to recognise it." As he said the words, he turned his head and gazed back to his father. "To do so, however, will have lasting consequences, and once I am king, I can marry who I like."

"You think?" His father did not attempt to hide the amusement behind the question. "It would be up to the council."

"The king rules the council."

"You think that too?"

Markis could feel Ryanac's presence at his back like heat. They didn't have to share the abyss for him to know his guard grew angry. Perhaps Lerai and his ancestors had let the council have their way, but Markis would not tolerate their insubordination. He was not about to argue the matter with his father, though. Whatever his personal feelings, Lerai had a few days, perhaps a month to live. Markis would be king by then, if not sooner. He had already displayed his tendency to consider the council's advice but not to take its orders.

"You not only disobey the council, you disobey me."

Markis didn't have an answer for that. Technically, he had disobeyed his king as well as his father, but he wasn't sorry for it. He held his gaze steady. Still, it took all his resolve not to show his anger when his father continued.

"I told you to exterminate them."

"Plunge us all into war and kill innocent people." Markis made it sound as he intended, not a question but a criticism.

Lerai shook his head. He had walked into the room with the appearance of a strong and virile man. Suddenly, he reached out to grip the back of a chair. Harton tensed slightly and he probably would have gone to Lerai if they were alone. The king no doubt hated showing even this slight weakness.

"Why the Azulites, father? What do you have against them?"

Those dark eyes, so like his own, flickered up to meet his gaze. His father had his reasons, but the man was going to take them to the grave with him. The most he would say now was the most he ever said. "Azulites are not to be trusted."

Markis wanted to ask who had wronged him, what injustice had an Azulite done to warrant this much hatred for the whole race, but it would be pointless. The closest he could get to it was to say, "You cannot judge an entire race on the acts of one person, or even a few."

"The only good Azulite is a dead Azulite. I've told you that since you were a boy." The king turned his gaze back to Tressa. "Still nothing to say?"

Raising her head and eyes, Tressa met his gaze. The movement was subtle, but Markis noted how she squared her shoulders. "There is no point trying to change the mind of a bigot," she replied. It took him a moment, but suddenly Lerai burst out laughing.

"I hate to say it, but I like her. She has your mother's spirit." The tension eased, but didn't fool Markis. His father might accept Tressa, even like her, but he disliked the idea of her being queen. The problem was what he would choose to do about it. "I'll not stop the

marriage,” Leraï said, as if reading his unspoken question. Then he turned his gaze to Uly, and Markis stopped breathing.

“La ruan,” Leraï said.

Uly glanced at Markis, betraying his nervousness, but then he looked back at the king and nodded. “I’m a thief, Sardian,” Uly admitted, taking Markis by surprise. He hadn’t known Uly knew the expression.

“And Simeon.” The way the king said it made it difficult to tell which he considered the more amoral. “You warm my son’s bed,” Leraï added, putting all his disgust into it. “You stay with him for want of a better life.” The remark brought colour to Uly’s face. Thankfully, the king turned his attention at once to Ryanac; fortunately, the man had very large shoulders that could carry even a king’s wrath. “And you, farmer’s boy.”

“Proud of it, Sardian,” Ryanac said, respectfully enough.

Letting go of the chair, Leraï moved to stand in front of him. “I heard when he sent for you. I did nothing to stop it. I remember,” he said, nodding, glancing from Ryanac to Markis, and back again, “what it was like in training. I thought to let him have a friend. It proves even a king can be foolish. Tell me, were you his first?”

Ryanac said nothing. For a moment, he simply stared at the king. “Begging your pardon, Sardian, his first what?” he asked finally.

Even Harton started, and then turned his face to the side, quickly straightening his expression. Just as well Harton stood at the king’s back. The king failed to see his reaction. Markis had seldom ever seen Harton laugh. Now the tall man struggled not to. As for the king, either his patience was better, or he truly felt worse than he looked.

“You,” he told Ryanac, “are a bad influence.” For once, even Ryanac had the sense to keep quiet.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Well, that could have gone worse.” Ryanac joked, but his relief was clear in his voice.

“Why do I feel like I should apologise to everyone?”

“Maybe you should apologise for not telling me we are not officially wed.”

*Ah.* Tressa had a point there. “Forgive me.” Markis glanced at her. “I was afraid you would be mad at me.”

“I am.”

“Yes, but now I have you home, and you can throw a fit in our private quarters rather than in a tent where the guards outside can hear you.”

The small woman missed a step. “I do not throw fits!”

“Yes, you do!” All three men spoke in unison. Tressa stopped walking so that Markis turned to face her.

"Has your father really told you that the only good Azulite was a dead one since you were small?"

He nodded.

"Then why do you not share his feelings? Someone influenced so young usually shares their parents' view."

Markis moved toward her until they stood close. "Because," he told her, "I have a mind of my own."

She seemed to consider his words and then dropped into a small curtsy. "I am glad of it. It is good to know such a thing about my husband, even if he is my husband to be." She said the last words harder. Somehow, some way, clearly she would make him pay for the small deception.



## Chapter Twenty

“Are you tired?” Markis asked Uly as they left the king’s suite.

The question seemed to hold some importance. “Somewhat. Not exhausted.”

Markis glanced at Ryanac. “Would you show Tressa to our suite?”

*Our suite.* Now Uly had cause to wonder what the sleeping arrangements would be. He would find out soon enough, but the only bed he could imagine himself happy in was with Markis. Ryanac hadn’t replied, and that was strange. Uly looked to the man’s face and as he did, he caught a glimpse of Tressa’s gaze flicking back and forth between the two Swithin men.

“Ryanac.” Markis made the man’s name sound more like a plea. The four of them still walked down one of the many corridors but, for the moment, the two men might as well have been alone. Finally, Ryanac gave a restrained nod.

“Be careful,” he said.

Markis smiled. “We’re on Swithin land.”

“We were on Swithin land when Antal got an arrow in his back,” the guard reminded him.

A pained expression touched Markis’s face, although he nodded in agreement. They had sent for a ga’lin the moment they arrived. That took priority even over the king’s summons. They rounded a corner and came to a stop. Markis turned to Tressa, taking her hands in his.

“Ryanac will take you to our suite. I have something I want to do. I’ll join you there later.”

“Do I have to prepare to meet anyone or dress for dinner?”

He shook his head. "No one will call on us this evening. We've had a long journey to get here. Tonight will be peaceful, I promise you." He bent his head and kissed her hands, and then her lips. Her gaze looked a little suspicious, but Markis apparently only found that funny. He laughed as he stepped back. "Come, Uly. There's something I want to show you."

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The stallion's coat was so black it shone with blue highlights. Uly gaped at the sight of the animal.

"Swithin born and bred," the stable master said, laughing as he did. The horse had to be. He'd never seen an animal like it. Uly had been sure the man was about to slap him on the back, and then noticed the prince. "Shavar," the man said with a bow, lowering his hand.

"Can I borrow him? Will he be happy to carry two?"

"This one." The man slapped the horse on the rump and the animal didn't even flinch. "He's spirited, but he'll do what I tell him. You have an eye for a good ride."

The remark brought a smile to Markis's lips and Uly flushed. He said not a word as Markis led the horse out and mounted him. Markis sat there a moment, patting the horse's neck, and then leaned down and held out a hand.

Uly hesitated only a moment. He had no worries about where Markis was taking him, only curiosity, but he'd never ridden a horse with someone else before. He barely managed alone. As he slid into the saddle at Markis's back, he heard the stable master tell the horse to behave.

"Hold tight to me," Markis said. He did, a little disconcerted when the sensation of snaking his arms around Markis's waist made him forget they were on a horse, forget everything else. He gasped in surprise and almost let go as Markis took the horse out of the yard at a run.

Rather than head into the city, Markis apparently took a circuitous route. The track took them down long, sandy dirt roads. A high stone wall on one side shielded them from the sun; green shrubs provided a border on the other side. As they continued, gradually the foliage grew more plentiful. They entered the canopy of trees. Here, Markis slowed the horse. His left arm curled around Uly's. The fingers entwined with his.

"I don't have time to show you much of our land tonight, but there's a couple of things I want you to see." He turned the horse onto another track of brown, moist earth. Something rich, fresh, and slightly acidic teased Uly's nose.

"What's that I smell?" Uly asked.

Markis laughed. "It's the woods. You can smell the earth, the leaves, the bark of the trees, even the roots. It wasn't so strong in Simmie but, did you never notice the smell of the parkland?"

As he considered Shavar's words, Uly recalled the open ground where he had tried to rob Markis. The trees there were old and the Swithin weren't responsible for those, but they had chosen an area and brought in other plants, nurtured the soil, and made it rich and fertile. He had always wondered why. In time, Uly grew to understand that the Swithin wanted to change the bedraggled landscape, and the grounds were a way to show his race what they could do. Everyone was allowed on the grounds, but anyone caught vandalising it faced the severest penalty. He could remember a time when people ripped out the plants anyway, but as the years went by, and the Swithin remained, those that didn't care about the parkland stayed away. He and his friends often went there to beg rather than steal. His attempt to steal from the man sitting alone on the bench had been little more than a prank, an aberration.

"What's wrong?"

More and more, Markis seemed able to sense his mood. He could refuse to answer, but what would be the point? "I was thinking what if I hadn't tried to steal from you that day? I wouldn't be here with you now." The hand gripping his tightened a little.

"You are here. Stop fretting. We've arrived."

As was often the case with the Swithin, they seemed to say two things at once, but the horse came to a halt without any apparent command from Markis. In front of them, a pale stone wall was broken by a small, arched opening and a wrought-iron gate. They were still just within the shade of the trees, but the late sunlight sparkled through the canopy and shimmered off the wall. Uly caught little glimpses of what lay beyond. Markis slipped down from the horse and then reached up to help Uly down. Their bodies slid together and Markis's hands tightened. The world stilled.

As Uly looked into Markis's eyes he became almost sure that Markis wouldn't let go of him. Maybe he would even kiss him. Then the moment passed. Markis stepped back. Uly didn't know if he should take satisfaction in the fact that it looked difficult for Markis to do so. Still, the quiet lasted. It didn't come from outside in the world. It came from inside, from certainty. Markis was Shavar, the Comet, soon to be the Swithin king. None of that mattered. What burned brightly was the thought that this man loved him -- not the prince, not the king, or the comet, but Markis, the man. He could see desire in the man's eyes. It almost sparked in the small distance between them, but that wasn't the only thing. He saw adoration. Markis loved him in a way Uly had never thought anyone would. What nearly crippled him was the idea that the chances were good that Markis could see the same thing as he gazed back. Markis had intrigued him from the moment the man had ordered him washed, fed, and had given Uly a bed for the night. In time, Uly had grown to like, care for, and even admire him. Almost inexplicably, he had wanted this man's love, and not just for the better life which that love afforded him. Perhaps he had simply wanted somewhere to belong. Now, having arrived in the Swithin City and knowing that his future was assured even if something were to happen to Markis hadn't changed anything for him. Uly didn't

know why, but a small part of him had feared that it would. Now the realisation that he still loved this man brought tears pricking at the back of his eyes.

He might have given in and cried, but Markis grabbed his hand and tugged him towards the gate. They stepped through and, at once, heady scents and bright colours dazzled the senses. Uly gaped, then closed his mouth, mindful he might swallow an insect. "What is this?"

"One of our gardens."

"One?" Uly moved his head back and forth, his gaze flicking around like one of the butterflies. Knowing these bright, fragile-looking things were flowers did nothing to chase away his disbelief. He'd never seen plants like these. His gaze finally settled on a white flower with frilled petals. The centre was a bright orange-pink. Its perfume drew his attention to it. He wanted to touch it and was sure he could, but still he feared it might crumble apart.

"They don't have that strong a scent close to, but when you have this many of them, they fragrance the air."

Uly glanced at Markis and saw that the prince held one of the flowers cupped in his hands. As he watched, the prince went to pluck it. Uly raised a hand to stop him. "No, don't."

"I was going to give it to you."

The idea of that brought strange warmth coiling inside his stomach. "I thank you, but don't. Let it stay on the branch."

A small, somewhat indulgent smile curved Markis's lips. "There are a lot of them." His tone suggested the plant could spare one. Uly shook his head.

"They are all individual."

The prince paused and then let go of the stem he'd been about to snap. "We fill the palace with flowers. You'll have to get used to it," he chided gently. "Come. I want to show you something else."

As they walked deeper into the garden, Uly saw strange pale shapes hidden in corners and set at strategic positions. Some looked like people. Others had no recognisable features but were a pleasing shape. Markis saw where he looked.

"They are statues."

"What are they for?"

Again, Markis laughed. "They're not *for* anything. Their purpose is to please the eye, but then you could say that about a lot of things, and in that they have importance."

"Am I to please your eye?" The moment he said it, he regretted it. It sounded presumptuous.

Markis stopped and caught his chin in one hand. "You please more than my eye," the prince told him. Again, they shared a moment where Uly thought they might kiss, but then

Markis took his hand and pulled him along. They came to a set of steps set into the side of a wall and Markis guided him to the top. The climb was short but steep, making the unexpected breeze at the top gratifying. They came out onto a raised stone area perhaps twenty feet in circumference. In front of them, the land spread out below, rich and green. To the right, in the distance, it rose upwards again. To the left...

"What is that?"

Markis came up behind him, encircling his waist with his arms and placing his lips against the back of Uly's head. "That," he said, "is the sea."

It must be several miles away and yet Uly could see a long curve of sand, and at its edge the light rippled on a great expanse of water. He shook his head, confused.

"Simmie has a river running through it, a waterway. It's large enough for small ships to come down from the sea, but I know you've never seen it. You've never seen anything like the sea. I've no time to take you out there today, but I will. I've so much to show you."

Uly stared at the peculiar landscape. The late sun warmed his face, the wind cooled his skin and stirred his hair, and Markis stood solid and real at his back. Suddenly, it all became too much. He shook his head as he turned, pressing his body into the other man, hiding his face against the man's neck and chest. Markis held him for a few moments and then ran his fingers up the side of his face, forcing his head back. Those dark, chocolate brown eyes stared into his.

"What is it?"

"Why do you love me?"

"You still consider yourself so unworthy? So unlovable?" Markis said the words gently with a small smile.

"No. It isn't that."

A hint of seriousness crept into the other man's expression. "You ask a good question. Ryanac once told me that I loved you partly because you were untouched by the comet."

Uly took hold of Markis's wrists. "That's ridiculous. It might have been a reason once, but not now. I saw what you did on the Azu plains. I'm no longer untouched by the comet, if I ever was. Besides, you aren't the comet, but it is part of you. The same comet saved Antal's life."

They stood there for a time. The sun began to set.

"What do you want me to tell you, Uly? I didn't intend to love you. This started with a game, something to amuse me, but the game changed on me. I took delight in watching you take pleasure in things that were commonplace to me. It took some time for me to realise I took delight in you more than anything. Many times, I thought about sending you away or making you leave. You saw the worst of me, and yet you stayed."

"I didn't have anywhere better to be." He said it purposely, although the pained look it brought to the prince's face cut his heart. Markis's gaze searched his.

"You mean that, don't you?"

Uly nodded. "It was part of my reasoning, but it wasn't the only reason I stayed. I've told you that. I...liked you. I wanted to see where this new and strange part of my life was going to lead. I hoped it would have you in it, but I never imagined you would love me, just wished it."

The smile returned to Markis's lips; it was broader this time. "You wished it?"

Uly nodded. "If it weren't for you, I'd be living back in Simmie. I might have died in some alley, or maybe I'd have a chance at a better life with all the changes your people are making, but there's no way to know. I would never have seen your beautiful city or any other place in the world. I wouldn't have seen such gardens as these. I wouldn't have seen such wonderful things, had books to read, learnt such things, smelt such fragrances, tasted such food, heard sweetness, or felt desire."

As he talked, the smile gradually faded from Markis's face and Uly was sure he knew why. "But Markis" -- he dipped his head and caught Markis's gaze before it slid away from his face -- "I wouldn't care for any of these things if I couldn't share them with you. I can't care that you're the comet. I wouldn't care if you lost your place here or your power overnight. I wouldn't care where we were as long as we were together. What the king said might have held some truth in the beginning, but not now. If I wanted to leave, you wouldn't see me dumped back in Simmie, on the streets, and I know that."

Markis nodded. "I would see you had a position, a life in the city, if that is what you wanted." He kept his face very blank as he said it, though his voice betrayed him a little. It almost made Uly smile. He caused this pain for a reason -- perhaps he had hung around Ryanac too long -- but he was about to end it.

"It would be nice to stay here, but I couldn't bear to if I couldn't stay here with you." Uly watched as Markis's eyes widened. They glittered. "Sometimes the way you look at me frightens me." Markis's brow tightened in what had to be puzzlement. "You look at me as if you expect so much of me, or you see something no one else sees. At times, it borders on adoration. For a long time, I didn't think I could live up to that or deserved it. Yet how could I not care for someone who I saw was good and kind, harsh for the right reasons, gentle when the world left him alone? I saw a man who might well wield the greatest power the world has ever known, but whose heart is as fragile as any street thief's."

"Funny," Markis remarked. "I saw a thief with the heart of a prince, who looked at a dirty, horrible world and wished for it to be better. You stood up to me when no one else would. Well, almost no one." He gave a gentle laugh, clearly thinking of Ryanac. "You were brave. Even today. I was proud of you standing in front of my father."

The comment puzzled Uly. He had hardly done anything. Then again, perhaps he had. He had opened his mouth in front of a king and refused to drop his gaze. If Markis hadn't been holding him, his knees might have buckled at the thought. So much for being brave. Uly stopped thinking as Markis kissed his brow, his eyes, his lips, until he calmed. The

pleasure came forth, soft and sweet. They shared breath. Fingers teased through his hair at the back of his neck.

"I'm sorry I needed time away from you," Uly said. "Part of that was even me searching for ways to escape your love. No one has ever wanted me for so long. I was afraid to trust that. I've wondered if you wanted me or the idea of me. You saved Antal, but you did it for me. You're still saving me."

"What you need to understand is that you saved me too. I have wondered if you wanted me or the prince. You see, I know Ryanac loves me. For some people you spend so much of your life together it creeps up on you. You look at each other and suddenly realise you've always been in love. Other times it slaps you in the face like a bolt of lightning or a shooting star." Markis laughed. "Like a comet. The most scary thing in the world is trusting your heart to someone."

Uly nodded. "I know that now. For so long I wondered if I were just an appendage. Even so, I felt I should be grateful, but..."

"You wanted more from me than that."

Again, Uly nodded.

"As much as you are mine, I am yours," Markis told him.

"When Antal lay dying, my biggest fear was that you would hurt yourself in the process of saving him. That's why I couldn't take my eyes off you." For a third time, Uly nodded, though this nod meant something else entirely. "I know you noticed. That fear for you taught me much. I feel like I've undergone a journey of my own on the way here. To my people I'm young. You told me I was a man, and as true as that was, I didn't know how to be one. I've still much to learn, but I know what I've decided. I'm not the person you took from the streets. I don't know who I am yet, but I want to find out, and I want you to find out with me. I've never known anyone like you, Markis. You care for me. You care for everyone."

"Now do you really need a long list of reasons why I love you?" Markis asked. Uly shook his head. This moment felt so right. They were alone and at peace. Shavar's grip tightened and Uly gazed up into Markis's face while the prince stared out to the horizon.

"I can't promise you it'll always be like this. I can't promise to keep everyone safe. I wish I could, but I can't. I once bemoaned to Ryanac what use was the comet if I can't save everyone with its power. He's told me enough times I can't be everywhere at once. I may not like it, but he's right, of course. So, I can't promise a perfect and peaceful life. I can promise you my love." Markis looked down. "I can promise to share my life and all the good things in it, even if the best of them happens to be you." His smile this time was self-deprecating. He hugged Uly against him and laughed. "By the comet, listen to us. If Ryanac could hear us now, he would never stop teasing."

Uly didn't care how soppy they sounded, but the image of Ryanac rolling his eyes made him laugh too. Markis traced the side of his face. "It is so good to hear you laugh," he said.

## Chapter Twenty-One

One of the most beautiful places in the palace was the atrium. It formed part of the royal suites. One could only describe the building as white but, although the stone held a pure, even glittering quality, somehow the use of plants and statues created enough shadows to soften it to the eye. Stairs led from an upper balcony attached to the main building down into the central courtyard. White cylindrical columns upheld a long mortared slab wide enough to sit or lean on and created a barrier to stop someone falling into the open space. On the balcony, one stood closer to the glazed dome, and the light shone brighter, harsher, yet even here, possessed a gentle quality. Below, another door led to the outside but remained locked from within. The chamber contained white stone and wooden benches. A small fountain sent water into the air at its centre and filled the room with a soothing, tinkling sound. Only the king's immediate family or their closest friends came here. Right now, Antal moved from one seat out of a beam of sunlight to another. As the sun changed position, so did he. His movements were steady enough but stilted. His face tightened as he lowered himself to the bench.

Markis stood above, looking down. So far, the younger man hadn't noticed him. Markis turned his head a little to the left in acknowledgement as Uly walked up to him. Ryanac approached a few strides behind. It was three weeks since the arrow attack and so far, they had found no clue as to the attacker. Markis had to grit his teeth and be patient. Unless there was another attack, he might even have to accept they never would. He didn't know which he feared most.

In a week, they would perform the ceremony that named him king. His father grew more ill by the day. The book said the comet could not heal disease and yet he had tried, not on his father, but on a sick foal. It did no good, so he must accept the book told the truth. He could heal, or help to heal, what it called an "unnatural" death, but he could not forestall age or illness, only something caused by a physical injury. Those caused by a blade or some form



of man-made weapon seemed to respond most of all. Antal's wound had been fatal, yet here, three weeks later, he was moving about almost healed. He might be stiff in his movements, but a little more time and rest would take care of that. Markis had thought to heal Antal again, but the prince resisted the temptation. Antal healed well. He didn't want to risk upsetting the careful balance of life inside the body.

Antal laid his head back against the stone; he closed his eyes. Suddenly, he moaned and sighed. His hand brushed over his groin. Clearly, he healed better than they all knew.

Glancing at his companions, Markis witnessed surprise on Uly's face, a look of amusement on Ryanac's. He moved to the stairs and started down them, keeping his gaze on Antal as he moved. The young guard wore only a robe, and as Antal moved his leg, Markis caught a glimpse of flesh. The hand strayed and then Antal turned his head, saw Markis and the others, flushed, and sat up.

"I thought I was alone, Shavar." The voice held respect as well as apology. The embarrassment was something new. Markis stood in front of him.

"Shy suddenly?" Ryanac asked. Markis suppressed a sigh.

"He means we're Swithin. As such, we're perplexed you seem awkward." In truth, they should have called out or left Antal in peace to be polite. They were in the wrong for interrupting him unless they needed to. Even then, Antal should have just stopped. The apology was polite, but not necessary.

"I'm in the palace," Antal said. "It...doesn't seem right."

"Why? I do it in the palace all the time," Ryanac replied "Though I've never had sex in *here*, whether alone or with someone." He looked around as though considering the aesthetics of the place and was seriously contemplating the possibility.

Antal couldn't seem to help himself. He smiled, and then laughed gently. "Perhaps I've been around Uly too long." He glanced at the man standing quietly at Markis's side. "Alas, even when you're not feeling your best your body has other ideas."

"Three weeks without sex." Ryanac sounded surprised, as if he had only just thought about it. He also sounded slightly horrified. Markis gave in and sighed.

"Some of us do manage to go more than a day or two."

Ryanac turned his head to look at him. "A whole day or two?" He made it a question, putting disbelief and bewilderment into his voice, but his eyes danced with a teasing light. Even Uly laughed.

"I never really thanked you," Antal said.

Markis had explained to Uly what he asked of Antal, and what they were here to discuss. Now he was at a loss for words; Antal's gratitude was unnecessary. "Yes, you did."

"No, I didn't. I said, or rather asked, if I owed you my life. I never truly thanked you for saving it."

"He wouldn't do anything less if he had the choice," Uly piped up. It seemed wrong a thief could make a prince's heart swell with joy and pride, but Uly always managed it.

"I know that," Antal replied, "but not everyone would. I guess I'm thanking him for being who he is."

Apparently, not only a thief could touch your heart. Markis blinked, met Antal's gaze, and didn't know what to say.

"I can't ask you to be my guard," Uly said, saving him.

"You're not."

"I can't allow Markis to ask you either."

"Allow?" The question slipped out before the prince could stop it. He looked at Uly while Ryanac sniggered on his other side.

"He may have asked, but he's not made the choice for me." Antal leaned back. Clearly, he would need another week or two, though he had begun exercising to loosen up damaged muscles. Uly frowned.

"You and I aren't...lovers." Uly struggled over the word. "You don't owe me anything. You've already risked your life for me once with no reason."

"We could be...lovers," Antal said, pausing on the word as Uly had, "but that has nothing to do with it. And no reason?" A frown came and went as he spoke. "I have plenty of reasons. I admit I might not have the grace to shield just anyone, but you're not the only person I would jump in front of an arrow to save."

"You are now," Markis said. Antal's gaze flicked to his face. It took a moment, but the guard swallowed and nodded. Antal knew what it meant to take on such a position.

"You're being mean," Ryanac said. "I protect you, but that includes Uly and Tressa."

Markis turned to look at him. "And your mother? Would you protect her?"

Ryanac frowned. "Of course I would."

"If you had to choose between my life and hers?" He watched Ryanac's frown straighten out and the expression harden. The guard didn't have to answer. Markis referred to duty. As Shavar's captain, Ryanac had to put Markis's life over anyone else's. It wasn't fair, and whether or not it was right was questionable. Markis didn't even like it. He would have ordered Ryanac to choose his mother's life in such a choice and his friend knew it, but both of them were aware that Ryanac would make the only decision open to him. He would protect Markis as Shavar now, and as Shavar Sardian, when he became king. This was what Markis asked Antal to do for Uly.

"I won't let him do that!" Uly's protest rang from the walls.

"I'm not giving you the choice," Markis told him. "I'm giving *him* the choice. It's his to make." Uly stared at him, glared even. Markis had never seen such a look on the young man's

face. Although it startled him, he also wanted to laugh. "This is necessary," he told him gently.

Uly turned his head to look at Antal. "Why would you do such a thing?"

The answer came with a smile. "I'll be captain. I'll have guardsmen. It's a position most of us long for but, more than that, I'll be captain *to* someone and in that, it's best to choose someone you would wish to defend. I may never find someone I like enough to want such a position again. I'll be Semari but I'll also be Sonndre, personal defender, like Ryanac."

"I thought Ryanac was already Silas Semari."

"I am."

Uly turned his head to the big man. "How many titles do you have?"

"Five," Ryanac said in all seriousness.

Uly blinked, closed his eyes, shook his head, opened his eyes, and looked back at Antal. He opened his mouth, closed it, and threw up his hands. "I give up," he said.

The other men laughed.

"So, you've given him life, you've given him a title." Ryanac stood with his arms folded and a mischievous grin on his face. His gaze flickered down to Antal's lap. The robe left little doubt that the young guard still sported an erection. "He still looks like he needs a helping hand."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ryanac's words made Uly start. He looked at the guard, at Antal, then to Markis's face. Markis looked at Antal, who had lowered his head and his gaze. Markis was right. Antal did seem to be feeling awkward.

"I...thank you for the offer, but I don't think I'm up to it even with help." Antal clearly realised what he had said when he closed his eyes, gave a little shake of his head, and said, "I mean...that didn't sound right...I..." Then he ran out of words. Ryanac dropped to his knees despite this, glancing up at Markis as he did. Uly didn't understand what they shared in that look, but Markis moved around the kneeling guard to the seat. He slipped onto the bench beside Antal, sliding an arm around the younger man's waist. There was nothing of lust in the movement. Markis offered support and comfort only; yet even so, Uly wanted to feel jealous and was shocked when he discovered he wasn't. He couldn't even summon the emotion. Ryanac's hands stroked Antal's thighs through the robe, but even as the large man settled between Antal's now parted legs, he kept the robe closed. From the curve of Markis's arm Antal turned wide, questioning eyes to Uly. Two pairs of eyes watched him, one set amber, the other a rich chocolate brown. From his position on the floor, Ryanac watched them, waiting for the answer in their faces.

These men were not embarrassed over this; they waited for Uly's permission. They were worried only about what he would think. Antal winced, and Markis settled him better

against his arm. This young man had almost died for him. Without Markis's intervention, he would have. This moment was about comfort, about giving Antal some pleasure, nothing more. Suddenly, Uly understood that with a clear, simple clarity as sharp as the reaper blade Antal had given him as a gift. Markis must have seen it in his face for he suddenly turned his attention to the man in his arms. He tugged open the sash even as Ryanac parted the robe. The cloth parted and slid aside. Between them, they kissed and stroked Antal's neck, his chest, his thighs, but not his lips. Antal's head fell back. His eyes closed.

Moving around the bench, Uly continued to watch them, Markis kissing and licking Antal's throat, one arm holding him in place while his free hand teased small dark nipples to prominence. Ryanac's lips trailed a line across the tight stomach and played around the edge of his navel. When Ryanac took hold of the firm jut of Antal's erection in his hand, the young man arched, groaned in what must be pain from the movement, yet gasped from something else, as firm strokes brought him fully erect. His eyes opened and he stared into Uly's face. He was still staring when Ryanac took him into his mouth.

A strangled sound escaped Antal's lips and, to Uly's horror, a tear ran from the corner of the young guard's eye. Leaning over him, Uly frowned, silently asking what was wrong. Their faces were close. It was a simple matter for Antal to reach up and take Uly's face in his hands. Markis no longer bestowed kisses, but one arm continued to support him while the other continued to play. Markis watched them both, but Uly could not pull away. Antal's fingers wove into his hair. He looked into his protector's face, upside down from above.

"I thought I was dead," Antal said, staring into his eyes. "I thought I was done and I was fine with that. Truly. I made my peace with it. It was finished."

Uly gave a slight shake of his head. He didn't know what Antal was saying to him. The fingers in his hair and around his skull tightened. Antal trembled, tensed. Markis moved in against him, supporting his back. The amber eyes closed for a moment. Antal swallowed, and then looked up again. Soft, wet sounds came from Ryanac's mouth but Uly couldn't see what he did; he could only hear him. That alone was enough to make him harden.

"I traded my life and it was right, even good. I closed my eyes and said my goodbye to the world. I never thought I'd open them again."

If Antal was thanking him, he didn't understand why. "That was Markis's doing."

"I know, but I saw the look in your eyes. You didn't want me to die. No." Now Antal gave a slight shake of his head. "Don't say you would have felt like that for anyone. That's not what I saw in your eyesssssszzzzzz!" Antal finished the sentence on a cry. Whatever Ryanac was doing stole Antal's breath. Antal gasped then forced his words out. "You didn't want me to leave you and I won't. It's not because I want anything from you, not even sex. We're friends, and I don't want to be Sonndre to anyone else. I don't. I won't, so don't ask me to say no. You shouldn't have kissed me the way you did. I told you a kiss could mean so many things."

Once more, Antal lost control, moaned, rolled his hips, winced, until Markis caught him up in his arms, holding him still. Antal's eyes closed; his lips parted. He started to pant and still the grip in Uly's hair held fast. "I don't care if you never kiss me again. I'm your captain. Your guard."

Antal let out another sound then, a whimper. He rolled his head, apparently unable to keep still even if Markis wouldn't let him move his body. Sweat broke out on his brow. His tongue snaked out of his mouth to lick his lips. His gaze grew distant, almost unfocused, then sharpened again as Uly closed the distance and kissed his brow. When he pulled back, Antal still gripped his head, but he had closed his eyes. Tears spilled out of them to run down the sides of his face.

A noise drew Uly's gaze. The position was difficult, but he needed to look. The sight of Ryanac gulping cock, taking a long, firm glide down, might have seemed crude to him once. To some it might have seemed wrong. Once, Uly even feared such a thing, even though he knew how good it felt, but right now it made him swallow. His throat felt empty; his mouth yearned for fullness.

Antal was giving little hitching breathes and twitches. The tears still flowed. "What's wrong?" Markis whispered softly into his ear.

Those amber eyes opened but they didn't search for the prince. They looked at Uly still. A slight frown creased the forehead. "I thought I was finished, done," Antal whispered, but they were all close enough to hear. "I never thought I'd feel this again. I thought the pleasure was all gone."

His voice contained wonderment. Uly set himself in Antal's place. What if he thought his life was over? What if one day he had reason to believe his life was over, done, and then he got a second chance? What would that moment of making love again feel like? He knew all too well. It would feel like making love with Markis for the first time when he had never imagined it could feel like that, so good, so right, so encompassing. Antal's whole body tensed a moment away from release. Their eyes met and Uly entangled his fingers into Antal's hair and around his face, as he leaned over to kiss him. Lips touched, tongues entwined and danced. Antal came, crying out into Uly's mouth and Uly inhaled more than a mere sound.

\* \* \* \* \*

Markis walked into his bedroom. The suite of rooms allowed for them each to have their own space, but they shared a large bathroom and living space. Even though there were four bedrooms, they seldom used them all during a single night. Some nights they used only one, and Markis had spent only one night alone since he came home. More often than not, Uly lay with him. Although Uly and Ryanac were not yet what he could call lovers, Uly seemed to find comfort in sharing a bed. If Tressa wanted Markis to herself, then Uly would sneak into Ryanac's room and find the man waiting to curl him in against his side or to

spoon. The quiet, gentle comfort Ryanac had taken to showing Uly both amused and touched Markis's heart. Whether the big man and Uly would ever make love remained to be seen. Having sex with another person in the same room didn't count even when you were two halves of an especially delectable sandwich. He wouldn't have given it consideration at all if he didn't know that Ryanac hoped to be Uly's lover one day. He sighed. If it happened, it would have to happen naturally. Still there was no animosity from the guard. What would be would be. Still, Ryanac didn't always help himself in these things. What they had done for Antal was very sweet, but...

The door banged shut behind him and Markis turned to face a wide-eyed Uly marching toward him. He opened his mouth, about to explain and maybe even apologise, when Uly's hands came up to his chest, shoving him back onto the bed. He fell, a laugh bubbling out of him that was quickly chased away as Uly crawled on top.

"I want you. I need you." Uly's hands were two wild things, scrabbling, clawing at his clothes.

"No preliminaries?" Markis joked. He grabbed Uly's arms. "We can take it slow." Hard and fast was good, but he remained careful to always prepare Uly for him first.

Uly shook his head. "You don't understand. I want you in my mouth."

His body and hands grew still; he held on to Uly's wrists. "You're sure?" It seemed a pathetic question at best.

"I need this with you. Now."

Why now? It seemed right to ask the question, but Markis was unsure how to ask without breaking the moment. He didn't want Uly to do this if he wasn't ready, but neither did he want to let the moment go. There was no way to know when Uly would feel this way again and, although a touch of selfishness hid behind the thought, he also wanted Uly to be free in his love for his own sake. The idea that they hadn't done everything as lovers ate at the young man's heart.

"Don't stop me." Uly stared down into his eyes. "I know what you're thinking. Please. I want this. Let me do it while I want it this much. While I want it more than I fear the past."

Markis nodded and, between them, their hands worked surprisingly quickly to get him out of his clothes. Uly would have dived on him then, but Markis held him back. "I want your shirt off at least. I need to feel your skin." Uly tugged it off so hard the fabric tore, making Markis giggle. Uly silenced him with a bruising kiss, not even drawing back when their teeth clashed. If he had still been wearing clothes, Uly's hands might have torn the garment apart. As it was, he clung to Markis's skin with his nails. Uly left Markis no time to think. He sucked a nipple into his mouth and made Markis gasp. In all the times they had made love, there had been a reluctance, a slight hesitation on Uly's part. He would slide his hands over Markis, but he always lay there with some passivity. Now he was as a wild animal let out of his cage at last.

He nibbled, licked, and sucked his way down, swirling his tongue, taking Markis's skin between his teeth as though he couldn't taste it enough. "I've wanted to do this for so long," Uly finally moaned.

"Then why didn't you?"

"I don't know. It never felt so real. Not even when you told me you loved me in the garden."

"How could that not seem real?" It had been one of the most real moments since they arrived here, as far as Markis was concerned. His one regret was that so far he'd not found time to show Uly much of the city. That would change soon enough when he was king and his father died. The thought should have pained him but, although he did not wish for his father's death, he could do nothing to prevent it. It seemed worse that Lerai should fade away like this. He was not even the harsh man who had greeted them a mere three weeks ago.

All ruminations fled his head as Uly's tongue touched his cock. He expected Uly to take his time, to lick up and down the shaft, get a feel for what he was doing, get over his reticence, but no. Uly opened his mouth and sucked him down. Understandably, he gagged, so Markis opened his mouth to advise caution, even though the sensation just about rolled his eyes up into the back of his head, when a hand tightened around the base of his cock. Uly hadn't taken the head out of his mouth. He held back the skin and slipped his mouth up and down, going a little deeper each time, taking a rest, if you could call it that, by lapping away with his tongue. He sucked, nibbled, drew a little of the most sensitive parts into a tiny suck, then kept his lips pursed and sucking as he ran them around the now dark plum. The sensation bludgeoned raw nerves and then, as the heat of Uly's wet, hot mouth engulfed him again, all Markis could do was cry out in warning. He made a half-hearted attempt to push Uly away, making it clear he could back off if he wanted, and then he came, long and hard. He felt Uly try to swallow, then the young man sputtered, coughed, and made a gagging sound no word could describe. Fluid escaped to splash his skin. Still, Uly held him in his mouth until he was done.

Markis didn't take the time to calm. He sat up, sliding his hands into Uly's hair around his face, drawing their mouths into a kiss, tasting what Uly hadn't managed to swallow or spit out. He could sense Uly's withdrawal. "What's wrong?"

"I spoilt it." Uly sniffed and swallowed, sounding upset. Markis laughed.

"No, you didn't. Nothing could spoil you wanting to do that for me." Once more, they shared breath and the intimate offering until Markis pulled back with a small cry. The comet flared and beat against the walls of his skin from the inside. He spiralled, but it was not with fear or pain, but joy.

Later, Uly lay with his head in his lap. Markis, propped up on satin pillows, stroked his face. "What is that?" Uly asked, suddenly lifting his head.

Markis listened. The soft sound of a stringed instrument filled the air. It drifted up from the streets.

"It's music."

Uly turned his head and looked at him. "That's never music."

Considering what they played where Uly came from, Markis had to shake his head. "No. What you've heard up until now isn't music. That is the music you'll hear from now on." He had thought nothing could surprise Uly now, but he took delight in the pleasure he could see in the young man's eyes. They lay and listened awhile.

"Do the Swithin have a word for sex?" Uly asked.

"You mean in the old tongue?"

Uly nodded, the soft tresses of his hair sliding against Markis's thighs and other things.

"We call it the same as love. We call it Sereik. It means conqueror." He might have liked to say he didn't know why Uly smiled, but somehow the word now more than ever made sense. Love had conquered them both.

 THE END 



## Glossary

Markis Pronounced Mar-ques (Marques: Portuguese -- nobleman)

Ryanac Pronounced Ryan-Knack (Ryan: Irish -- little king)

Samir (Arabic -- entertaining companion)

Shavar (Hebrew -- comet)

Silas (Latin -- forest dweller)

Uly Pronounced Yuli (Ulysses: Latin -- wrathful)

S-names are designations rather than names.

Dai'mean -- soother

Ga'lin -- healer

La Ruan -- thief (insult)

Safiyah -- best friend

Saldorra -- archers (winged gift)

Sardian -- king

Sarrette -- spearman (brave)

Sarris -- reserve Shield and Troops (troops of a fort)

Sarvis -- spearman (skilled)

Seberto -- flank Shield (glorious)

Sedek -- successful (in training)

Sedryche -- line Shieldsman (battle chieftain)

Semari -- captain (industrious leader)  
Sereik -- conqueror (love and sex)  
Serrick -- spearman (mighty)  
Serves -- polearms (army warrior)  
Shaylah -- blind (someone who refuses to see)  
Sidon -- a male nightgown  
Sidony -- a female nightgown  
Simeon -- little hyena (a scavenger)  
Sonndre -- personal defender  
Swithin -- strong

## **Sharon Maria Bidwell**

Sharon Maria Bidwell was born one New Year's Eve within the London area. Since having her first short story accepted and the editor announcing her as "a writer who is going places," her work -- poems, short stories and articles -- have appeared steadily in print and online publications. Previously, she kept the erotic side of her writing separate. The genre appealed though as it allows her the freedom to create something more expressive, less oppressive. She firmly believes that having a chance at such "free reign" reflects favourably in her work. It has always been a part of her personality in that she likes surprising and delighting people. She links her most favoured and often most successful work closely to fantasy, though her writing crosses genres.

She loves reading, the movies and going to the theatre and spending time with a few very special people. Her friends are waiting to discover something she isn't good at. She often thinks about moving but lives primarily in a world of her own. Visit this diverse writer's site at: <http://uk.geocities.com/theviewoveraonia>.